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What Are You Really Saying? A Grounded Theory Study of How Leaders Communicate Strategic Goals

Toccara C. Stark
University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

What Are You Really Saying?

A Grounded Theory Study of How Leaders Communicate Strategic Goals

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Toccara C. Stark

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We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

Dissertation Committee

Alla Heorhiadi, PhD, EdD, Committee Chair

John Conbere, EdD, Committee Member

Chato Hazelbaker, EdD, Committee Member

4/12/16

Date

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, who has always supported every dream and adventure to which I set my mind, and to my husband for being my rock through many years of graduate school, never faltering despite the highs and lows.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to a wonderful and inspirational professor in my master's program, I was introduced to and fell in love with the field of organizational development. Thank you, Louise Minor, for introducing me to this wonderful field. When I discovered there was a doctoral program in this field, I knew it was my calling. I was in love from the very first day of class, and that love has never ceased.

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Abstract

Leaders constantly face the need to engage employees in the strategic direction of their organizations in order to achieve organizational goals. A core element of engaging employees involves being able to communicate strategic goals to the employees so they understand, support, and can act upon these goals. However, communicating strategic goals often falls short of these objectives. Instead, communications that convey these goals are not understood or do not seem relevant, which results in employees being disconnected, uninformed, and disengaged. Leaders often feel frustrated and confused as to why their efforts to communicate strategic goals are not effective, and they look for ways to improve their communications with employees.

The purpose of this study was to develop a theoretical framework of how leaders communicate strategic goals to their employees. In the attempt to answer the question, "How do leaders make choices about how to communicate strategic goals to their employees," this research shed light on effective communication of strategic goals. Through a grounded theory methodology, a two-petal communication model emerged. This model demonstrates how a continuous flow between performing tactical tasks and building relationship with employees can create an environment conducive for effective communication of strategic goals.

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Chapter 1: Background

Background of the Study and Researcher's Interest

"They never tell us what is really going on." This was one of the main comments I heard during a consulting project with a government organization that was undergoing an overhaul of its technology system, which in turn was driving a need to change the workflow and processes within the organization. My consulting partner and I had been invited to assess the situation and provide input on how the organization could improve buy-in among employees and guide them through the change that would forever alter how they understood and performed their work.

At the time my partner and I began our work, the organization was on its third attempt to update its technology system. The first attempt failed when the vendor pulled out of the project before it was half-complete. This left the organization with two technology systems in place that employees had to manage in order to keep all of the data intact. The second attempt happened several years later after the state legislature mandated that the technology be updated before the vendor for the original system stopped supporting it. This second attempt failed before it even began when the vendor backed out prior to signing all of the contracts. Leaders in the organization were determined to make the third effort sustainable, and were actively doing everything they could to make it succeed. And it was working.

It was at this point that leaders realized that the implementation of the new system would dramatically change how the organization conducted its day-to-day business. This change included all new processes, which would merge some job functions and eliminate others. Leadership team members had put a lot of time and effort into planning the implementation, trainings, and anything else needed to get the new technology system on board; however, they did not think through how they would help employees to transition, both mentally and emotionally. The organization needed help.

What my partner and I found when we arrived was a group of employees who were disheartened, scared, and untrusting. They believed the leadership team and managers were not telling them the whole story about how the changes within the organization were going to take place and how change would impact their jobs. They indicated that leaders, managers, and supervisors were not providing enough detail for employees to understand why they were being asked to do certain things as part of the change initiative. Many employees noted that leaders and managers were not adequately connecting the change initiative to the organization's strategic goals or vision.

Despite the availability of resources for sharing company information, many employees indicated that these communications were not informative; the information provided was repetitive or not new, and information was often presented in technical language or jargon that could not be understood. As a result, employees felt they were being kept in the dark about what was truly happening and that leaders and managers were holding back key information. A few employees acknowledged that the lack of information prevented them from getting on board or buying into the change, despite understanding that this type of support was critical for the change to take place.

The sentiments expressed by the employees at the organization from the example above were a result of miscommunication. According to Mayfield and Mayfield (2002), miscommunication, or lack of communication, often leads to a lack of trust, lack of motivation, and disloyalty among employees – all elements, my partner and I observed in the organization in which we were consulting. Mayfield and Mayfield went on to explain "…leaders are often faced with a plethora of options and communication techniques that are not directly linked to strategic goals. To make sense of these various communication tactics, leaders need a systematic method which links practice to results" (p.89). My aim with this research was to understand how leaders communicate strategic goals to employees and what they use to assist them with this communication.

Problem Overview

There is an abundance of information and resources available for leaders to learn about communicating effectively and engaging employees—books, articles, trainings, seminars, retreats, etc. But as Mayfield and Mayfield (2002) discussed, what is lacking is a process for identifying exactly what information to convey and for making that link from actions to results for employees. Based on a preliminary scan, I was unable to find any resources that would provide instruction or guidance on the tactical steps for how a leader determines which details to communicate regarding an organization's strategic goals. The resources found provided a high-level approach to communicating strategic goals versus the more tactical decision-making steps that need to occur when communicating directly with an employee.

For example, Laban and Green (2003) described a framework that emphasized a broader communications approach, including building a communications strategy, understanding the communications channels available/selected, and selecting the best packaging technique. Everse (2011) provided a similar approach, with eight areas of consideration for communicating strategic goals:

1. Keep the message simple, but deep in meaning.
2. Build behavior based on market and customer insights.
3. Use the discipline of a framework.

4. Think broader than the typical CEO-delivered message. And don't disappear.
5. Put on your "real person" hat.
6. Tell a story.
7. Use 21st-century media and be unexpected.
8. Make the necessary investment.

What I saw as the challenge with both Laban and Green's and Everse's approaches is that they only begin to scratch the surface of the complex topic of communicating strategic goals in organizations. For example, when I looked at the first recommendation from Everse—"keep the message simple, but deep in meaning"—there were various ways to understand this action. How simple is simple? What provides depth to the meaning? And how do these understandings and meanings vary from one leader to another, and potentially, from how they communicate with one employee versus another? The recommendations provided by these authors, like many others, leave much to the reader's interpretation.

Problem statement. Organization leaders often face challenges communicating strategic goals to employees in a manner that is understood and secures buy-in from employees. An inability to successfully convey strategic goals to employees hinders organizational effectiveness and the achievement of those goals.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to develop a theory around the framework and logic leaders use to determine what information they share with employees when communicating strategic goals and how they communicate those goals. The research question was: How do leaders communicate strategic goals to their employees? In answering this question, I wanted to understand how leaders select the specific pieces of information they choose to share, what pieces they choose to leave out, the logic or process employed to make this selection, and finally, the actions taken to communicate this information.

Significance

The significance of this research is in the insights gained into how leaders communicate strategic goals from their personal perspectives. I believed this topic was important since there currently appears to be a gap in the existing literature regarding this topic. In addition, much of the information I found regarding communicating strategic goals looked at the topic from the perspective of organizations or employees (Whitley & Chambers, 2009; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002; Young & Post, 1993), but I did not find any information that addressed the topic from the point of view of the leader. More of this research significance is presented in Chapter 5.

Definition of Terms

Communication. As it relates to organizations, I am defining communication as the process that individuals use to convey meaning to other individuals through both verbal and nonverbal messages or actions (Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 2005).

Disconnect. Disconnect in communication is the outcome when a message is relayed but not understood by the receiver of the message.

Leader. A leader is someone who provides direction and influences others for the purpose of achieving a common goal. For the purpose of this study, the term leader refers to anyone in organizations who conducts these activities, including executives and managers.

Relational. For the purpose of this study, relational is defined as the way two or more things are connected. This study evaluated the relational interactions between leaders and employees in the context of how strategic goals are communicated. Komives, Lucas, and

McMahon (1998) stated that the majority of leadership activities are within an interactive context between individuals or group members.

Relationships. Relationships are ways in which two or more people are connected. In an organization, this includes connections based on department, skill set, role or position in the organization, and personal preferences and values that form connections with others in the organization.

Strategic goals. Strategic goals are the overarching long-term goals set by an organization and are part of the organization's corporate strategy. These goals serve as a source of motivation for the organization and provide a measurement of performance (Allen & Bach, 2009).

Tactical. Tactical actions or behaviors refers to small actions that are taken to support a larger strategy or goal. Tactical communications and tactical interactions refer to activities that convey these small actions or "tactics."

Trust. The basic tenet of trust, as defined by Starnes, Truhon, and McCarthy, is the "ability and willingness to meet people without inordinate suspicion, the ability to talk comfortably to and deal with strangers, and the willingness to enter into intimate relationships" (p. 4). In this study, trust refers to the willingness and ability of leaders and employees to enter into mutually beneficial relationships with one another.

Overview of Chapters

This chapter provided the rationale for this study and relevant background information. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the existing literature that serves as a framework for this study. Chapter 3 provides a detailed overview of this study's methodology, which was based on Charmaz's (2006) approach to grounded theory, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents research findings and a proposed theoretical model that provides an answer to the research question. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the research findings, implications of the findings for practice, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of scholarly research as it relates to organization and leader communications and communicating strategic goals. Literature review in grounded theory is an area of tension among researchers, with debate around when and how to conduct the literature review. Specifically, there is concern about the potential that literature review may bias a researcher's thinking and analysis (Dunne, 2011; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Elliot & Higgins, 2012). However, as Urquhart (in Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) stated, the literature review can serve as a beneficial orienting process for grounded theory researchers by providing an understanding of the current thinking in the field. Of course, it is important to make sure these insights do not influence the research study itself. The ability to orient the process is especially important when a researcher studies broader topics such as communication and leadership.

For this study, I conducted a preliminary review of broad categories related to communicating strategic goals, including communication in organizations and how leaders communicate. The goal of this initial literature review was to help me understand current research and the gaps existing in the literature and research. It also helped me refine the scope of the research. After the study was completed, I conducted a more in-depth literature review and compared it to my findings.

Communication in Organizations

Organizational communication is vital to organizational success (Harrison, 2013). The achievement of organizational goals is tied to this success. According to Berson and Avolio (2004), providing direction to employees on how to achieve organizational goals is a core responsibility for leaders through the mission, vision, and values of the organization. Leaders across all levels of an organization are responsible for communicating strategic goals and gaining employee support and buy-in of those goals.

The ability of leaders to achieve an organization's strategic goals depends on how they themselves understand and clarify these goals, how they share these goals in a manner that connects it to the specific work of employees, and how they support the completion of those goals. Leaders must be able to interpret the strategic goals for employees in manner that demonstrates how the goals are connected to the organization's mission as well as their relevance to the individual employee's job. Additionally, leaders need to be able to respond to questions and provide information as needed to maintain support for and clarity of the goals.

Harrison (2013) stated that at the core of a successful organization is a strong organizational strategy. However, that strategy is only as good as the understanding and engagement that surrounds it. If employees understand their role in achieving this strategy, according to Harrison, the organization will move forward. She also stated that it is important for the mission, vision, and values of the organization to be integral to the organization's strategic plan, and that these elements should be communicated to employees from day one to ensure the employees are in alignment with the goals and understand how their role relates to the overall strategy.

According to Mayfield and Mayfield (2002), communication is at the core of establishing trust and motivation among employees, which drives organizational loyalty and ultimately, organizational success. In organizations where trust is present, they stated there are also clear communication practices among managers and leaders that drive commitment in the organization. Commitment, trust, and loyalty help achieve unity and organizational goals.

However, this connection between organizational strategy and employee roles is not always present. A study, published in *HR Magazine,* found that leaders need to increase their communication in organizations to overcome information gaps in workplaces. The study also found that more than one-third of senior managers, executives, and employees said employees rarely know what is happening in their organization. Only fifty-five percent of employees know what is happening some of the time (Hastings, 2012).

How Leaders Communicate

One of the key elements of communication in organizations is the messengers—leaders. As Mayfield and Mayfield (2002) stated, there are plenty of resources available to leaders to aid communication, but none that adequately address the need for communications to be connected to strategic goals. They add that the communication of strategic goals is also vital to transmitting behavioral intent to employees, and as such, leaders need a strategic framework that helps them select effective communication practices.

Based on this understanding of the need for effective communication by leaders, Mayfield and Mayfield (2002) identified the Motivating Language Theory as a comprehensive model for providing this strategic framework. Within this model, there are three types of speech that are representative of organizational settings, in which communication about strategic goals takes place. The first type is direction-giving language, which is the language used when leaders drive performance through "clarifying tasks, goals, and rewards while reducing ambiguity." The second type is empathetic language, which occurs when leaders display compassion to employees. The last type, meaning-making language, takes place when leaders choose words to explain "cultural norms, values, and behaviors that are unique" (p. 91) to the organization. Employing language within this model provides leaders with a method for engaging employees in communication and making direct connections between organizational strategy and daily processes.

The importance of language in leaders' communication was also cited by Young and Post (1993) in their evaluation of how leading companies communicate with employees. As they pointed out, managing through change requires strategic communication by leaders. This includes not just the language used, but also the specific terminology, mixed with the ability to communicate by both talking and listening.

In their study, Young and Post also showed that it is vital for leaders to communicate key messages themselves and not delegate this task to others. In other words, ensuring the leader is the one delivering the message is as important as the actual message; a leader's persona and role in the organization affects the context of the message and its validity. Communications that come from leaders carry more weight than those shared by colleagues, which leads employees to see these messages as important to hear and understand.

Given this, the organizational stature of the leader plays a direct role in how communication takes place and is understood by employees. As one study participant shared with Young and Post, while top leaders are in charge of setting the vision and big picture, supervisors and managers (lower-level leaders) are the ones who can make the direct connection between the message and the work. Berson and Avolio (2004) also cited the role of top leaders in setting the strategic direction and goals, and identified lower-level leaders as being responsible for disseminating and explaining these goals to employees.

Summary

Communication is an important activity in organizations. There is evidence that communication—including communicating the mission, vision, culture, and strategic goals—is critical to the success of an organization, and that leaders play an important role in the communication process. Leaders at all levels of an organization are responsible for fostering communication and conveying vital information to employees. The success of communicating strategic goals to employees, among other important information, relies heavily on how leaders choose to communicate these messages. This includes the methods they select for communication with employees, as well as the specific language they choose to use.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes my research methodology and protocol for conducting this study. My chosen methodology for this study was grounded theory, which is detailed here along with my process for collecting and analyzing data. While I initially chose to follow the approach recommended by Charmaz (2006), I made several adjustments throughout the process to better align the methodology with my data and analysis. These adjustments are noted as appropriate during the various steps of collecting and analyzing data.

Grounded Theory

According to Charmaz (2006), grounded theory provides a way for researchers to explore an idea or issue through deep analysis of data and analytic writing. This methodology uses guidelines that are systematic yet flexible for collecting and analyzing data. Charmaz explained that research participants bring their own unique experiences, understanding, and points of view to the topic at hand, and the researcher's finished constructed ground theory is a construction of these realities. Jones and Alony (2011) summarized the benefits of grounded theory, noting its rigor and systematic approach to uncovering social processes that inform theory, yet with some flexibility and freedom for the researcher to be creative. They also discussed the added benefits of grounded theory's ability to clarify complex phenomena, its openness to social issues and the social construction of experience, its freedom from previous knowledge and information, and its adaptability to various types of researchers.

Grounded theory's systematic method of analysis gives researchers the advantage of not needing to conceive a hypothesis, but rather allows the freedom to examine the research topic and allow issues to emerge. Jones and Alony (2011) stated that this approach yields deep insights into a topic with which the researcher is unfamiliar, and that it is an important method for studying social issues and topics that have a social nature. They argued that rather than forcing a preconception or assumption, grounded theory allows for exploration of an issue through data.

I selected this methodology for the reasons described by Jones and Alony, specifically its applicability to socially related topics, and the ability to uncover the meaning and deeper processes that inform how leaders communicate. The nature of my research question is suited to grounded theory because it allows for exploration and theories to emerge versus forcing assumptions. Because communication at its core is about conveying, interpreting, and understanding meaning, it can be easy to force one's own perceptions onto data and research participants. The methodical process of grounded theory and its constant comparison-analysis helps prevent perceptions and bias from influencing the data analysis. Because it is my desire to uncover the thought processes and decision-making behaviors of leaders who communicate strategic goals to employees, grounded theory is best suited to capture these insights from the perspective of the leaders.

Participant Selection

Sampling. I used *theoretical sampling* to identify a pool of participants that would allow a theory to emerge. This approach allowed themes, ideas, and questions to arise during the data collection process and to inform the selection of subsequent participants (Stern in Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Additionally, theoretical sampling allows for more flexibility and emergence of theory than if a participant list is selected in advance. This type of sampling also supports the process for conducting interviews until saturation is achieved.

Criteria. Participation was open to individuals in leadership roles in which they: a) manage or supervise two or more employees; b) have been with their current organization for a minimum of two years, and c) have communicated strategic goals to employees as a key responsibility. The requirement of overseeing two or more employees was to collect data that reflects the leader's overall behavior in communicating strategic goals versus the leader's interaction with one direct report, which may be influenced by interpersonal dynamics. A timeframe of two years with the organization was desired because it allowed time for a leader's sufficient immersion into the organizational culture and a good understanding of organizational processes. This timeframe also helped ensure participant leaders had ample opportunity to have communicated strategic goals at least once in their tenure.

Selection. I selected study participants using convenience case and snowball sampling. Participants came from those to whom I had access through my personal and professional networks, and using snowball sampling, asked study participants to invite others who were eligible to participate in my study. I also reached out to my networks where there were people who, I believed, could provide rich data. I aimed to recruit a range of leaders, and did not look for any specific leadership styles or traits when selecting participants. Rather, I relied on participants to self-select by agreeing to participate in this study. This approach resulted in nine participants, with five participants I knew from my professional network and four participants I did not know who were referred to me through others. Signs of saturation appeared by the sixth interview, with common patterns and topics being consistently present. Two additional interviews were conducted to confirm that saturation had been reached and no new learnings or insights emerged.

To recruit the participants, I emailed them an invitation to participate in my study. The email described the nature of the study, criteria for participation and expectations of participants (see appendix A). Those who were interested in participating contacted me to schedule an interview. I selected participants based on their timely response to my invitation and the level of theoretical saturation at the time of response.

Saturation. Saturation is used to determine when enough data has been collected and it is appropriate to stop collecting data. Saturation is determined once no further insights, ideas, patterns, or concepts that inform conceptual categories and/or theory development are uncovered (Charmaz, 2006). Since there are no specific guidelines in grounded theory, I relied on my instincts as I was conducting interviews, along with my memos and the mind map (see Figure 3.1 below) to inform the saturation point. Using these tools, I reached what I believed was saturation after approximately six interviews, which was sooner than anticipated. To be certain, I conducted three additional interviews and determined that saturation had indeed been achieved and no new evidence was uncovered.

Data Collection

According to Charmaz (2006), collecting rich data is key to collecting "solid material for building a significant analysis" (p.14). Grounded theory provides a way for the researcher to see the participants' world through their eyes—feelings, perceptions, observations, etc.—which creates the richness of the data. Charmaz also stated that data collection in grounded theory heavily emphasizes the analysis of action and process, with the primary question being "What is happening here?" This question is answered through interviews, which are described as directed conversations for collecting data and gaining understanding.

In this study, I collected data through one-on-one interviews with leaders who met the participant criteria. Following the process for grounded theory, I used intensive interviewing to allow for in-depth exploration of my research topic. This approach allowed participants to share their personal interpretation of their experience, including thoughts, feelings, and learnings.

I provided a consent form to all my participants at the beginning of their interview (see Appendix B). All participants willingly signed the consent form and indicated both an understanding of their role in the study and their consent to participate. To drive conversation during the interviews, I used a set of broad, open-ended, non-leading questions that encouraged the participants to describe and reflect upon the experience they were sharing without taking on an interrogative feel, as described by Charmaz (2006). To help uncover additional details and to keep the interviews moving, I employed probing follow-up questions to learn more about the experiences of the interviewees as they communicated strategic goals. Additionally, questions were reformulated as needed to align with my theoretical sampling approach and confirm saturation. Interview questions became more focused in order to delve into emerging themes and categories. The interview protocol included the following questions and statements:

- Tell me how you have communicated strategic goals to employees.
- How did you prepare for sharing this information?
- How did you understand or interpret the strategic goals you were asked to convey?
- How do you identify which information or messages to communicate or to leave out?

The nine interviews took place from December 4-30, 2013. Interviews were conducted in mutually agreed upon locations where interviewees could feel comfortable. Six of the interviews took place in-person at the professional offices of the interviewees, and two of the interviews were conducted by phone. Interviews were conversational in tone and flow, which allowed participants to openly share their feelings, opinions, intentions, and actions at length and in depth. The length of interviews ranged from approximately 30-75 minutes and interviews were recorded with permission of the participant, resulting in an audio file that was used to create a transcription. Detailed notes were also taken during each interview, followed by a memo to capture thoughts and themes to be applied to data collection and analysis.

I began interviews by providing an overview of why this topic is of interest to me and how I landed on this specific subject for my research. This opening was also an opportunity for participants to ask any questions for their own clarification. Then I asked each participant to tell me about themselves, including a little bit about their organization, how long they had been at their organization, their specific role, how many employees are in their organization and how many direct reports they have.

From here, I used my interview questions and guide to lead the interviews, moving through the questions and making adjustments as needed based on the participants' responses. I did not offer participants any definitions for communication or strategic goals—both key terms in research question—which allowed the participants to define these terms in their own words and through their own understanding of my research topic. This approach to structuring interview questions was intentional because it helped me to capture these definitions as part of the data, while also allowing the participants to talk about these topics from their own unique perspectives. Additionally, allowing participants to define these terms was an important aspect of the research since I wanted to understand the participants' perspective and mindset for how they communicate strategic goals to employees.

To uncover deeper data, I asked probing questions during each interview. For example, when a participant would tell me about the various methods they used to communicate with employees, I would ask why they chose those methods. My objective in asking probing questions was to understand to the best possible extent the thinking and rationale behind participants' choices and behaviors. Asking probing questions often led to in-the-moment reflecting by the participant, which offered additional insights and richer data. Asking probing questions during these reflections also opened up conversations that explored the experiences and learnings the participants referenced—both positive and negative—and how these informed their current approach and behaviors when communicating strategic goals. The reflections shared by participants were an unintended outcome of the interviews, which occurred in the first interview and that I sought in all subsequent interviews because they provided a depth of data for informing this research.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a critical part of the grounded theory process because this is where and how the theory emerges from the data. Charmaz (2006) stated, with this methodology, shaping and reshaping the data throughout the process refines the data. Grounded theory uses a constant comparison approach, with data continually being compared at each step of analysis.

For this study, data analysis took place after I had completed all of the interviews. I analyzed the data through the use of memos and a mind map, during the transcriptions of each interview, and finally, during three stages of data coding. After each interview and transcription, I wrote a memo to capture a summary of key takeaways, themes that appeared, and questions that arose from the data. In conjunction with the memos, I created a mind map that also captured key terms and ideas. This approach allowed me to begin to identify categories and gather insights for informing subsequent interviews, and supported the coding process.

Transcriptions. While transcribing each interview, I continued to memo in order to capture questions and ideas that arose. I also took time to note key quotes from each participant who, I believed, conveyed a strong point and provided clarity; the quotes provided a supporting point to an argument the participant was making. Writing memos was another opportunity to see how each interview built upon the previous one and reinforced patterns I started to see in my initial memos and interview notes. These memos produced a series of questions that I tracked and wanted to come back to during the coding process because I felt there was something in them to be discovered:

- What are the basics of communicating strategic goals?
- Can I map out the communications process each interviewee goes through and show each one layered on top of the general communications process?
- How does personal reflection change/improve/enhance leadership communications?
- What role does caring (by the leader) play?
- How much of what the leader decides to communicate is based on what they (the leader) believe the employee(s) needs to do their job?
- As the leaders were talking, what lessons did they share about how they had learned what to do and what not to do? How did those lessons affect how they communicated strategic goals?
- How do participants use internal/informal leaders as advocates or ambassadors for communicating?

In reviewing the list, it became apparent that these questions were all sub-questions that supported my research question. I used this list of questions as a reference for conducting my data analysis and findings, which helped me continue to look at the data critically and understand what information was presented since these questions arose during the analysis process. Referencing these questions also helped me to process my own thinking during data analysis. Because these questions had piqued my interest, I came to believe that if others looked at my data, they also would come away with similar questions.

Mind map. Throughout the transcribing and coding process, I built a mind map to capture key words and phrases that appeared in the interviews in order to visually track core ideas that arose from the data (see Figure 3.1). This gave me a consistent place to evaluate my own thinking, as well as the ideas that I was gathering, in a visual way versus the linear format of the memos. I placed the concept of my research question—strategic goals—at the center of the map, and added core ideas (large pink circles) and supporting words and phrases around the research question as they arose in the interviews, transcriptions, and data analysis.

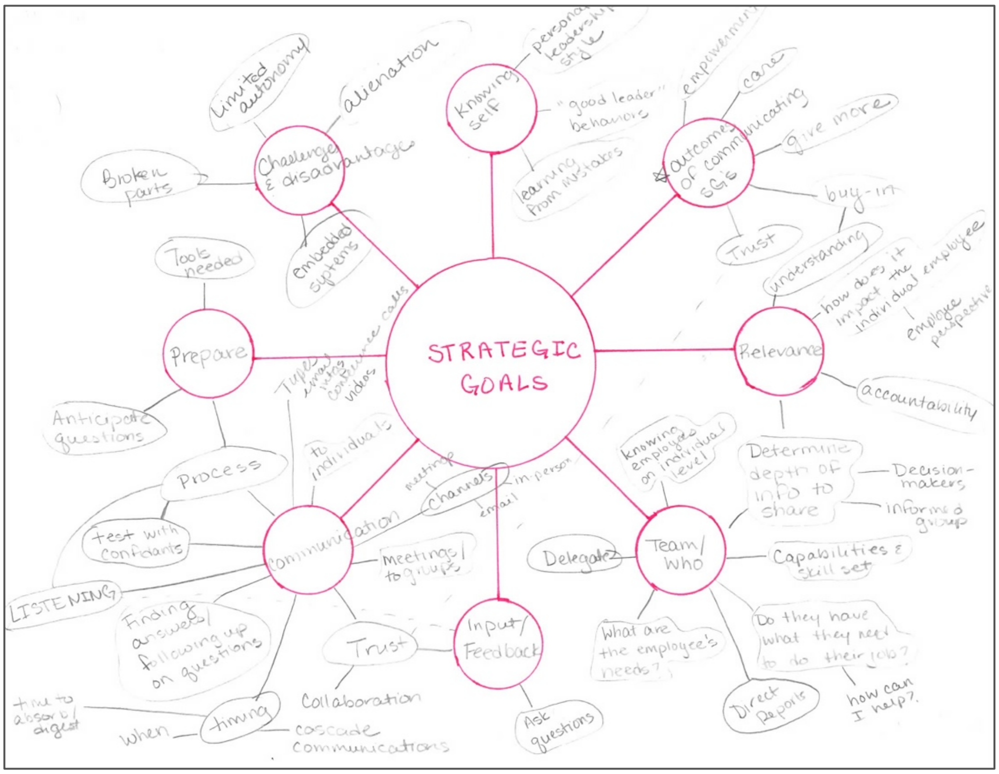


Figure 3.1. Mind map created while transcribing and coding interviews

I intentionally conducted the mind map exercise in addition to writing memos to help me bracket my biases and assumptions, and organize the ideas that emerged in a broad way to avoid locking myself into a particular way of thinking about my data. The mind map allowed me to visualize where data and ideas were starting to come together in clusters and potential relationships; it also helped me avoid forcing a hierarchy to the data that might have occurred by writing the ideas and phrases out in list form.

By creating the mind map, I was able to begin grouping ideas together using the participant's language and see connections. As I moved from one interview to the next during my coding, I started to see patterns or new connections emerge, and made note of these things in both my memos and on the mind map. Identifying these initial clusters gave me a starting place for things to consider while doing my initial coding, as well as a way to see gaps and ideas I missed if new ideas emerged. Once coding was complete, I input the mind map into an online mind map tool, MindMup, which allowed me to more clearly see the clusters of ideas, and to identify linkages as my data analysis progressed (see Figure 3.2).

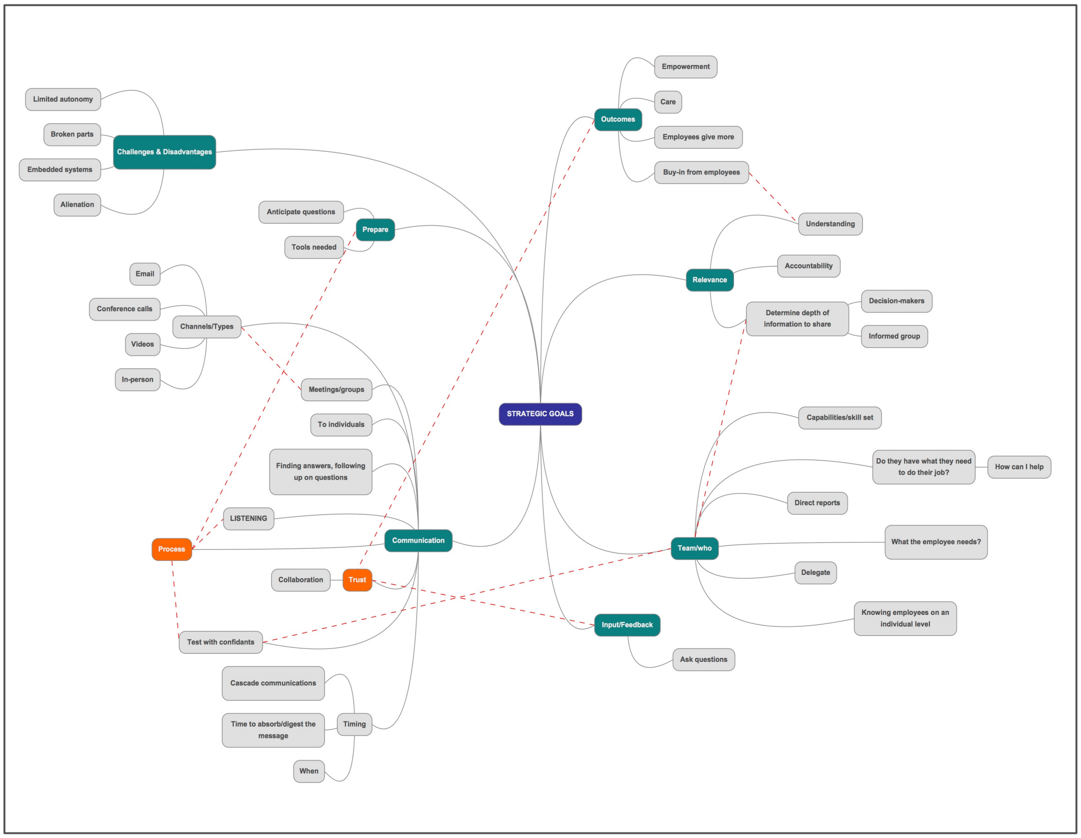


Figure 3.2. Mind map created showing initial linkages between data

The mind map also provided another way to see if and when I reached saturation with my interviews when I was no longer adding new ideas or phrases to it after subsequent interviews. Based on the mind map, I achieved saturation around interview six. There were no new additional core ideas identified in interviews 6-9; however, I did add a few new phrases and key words.

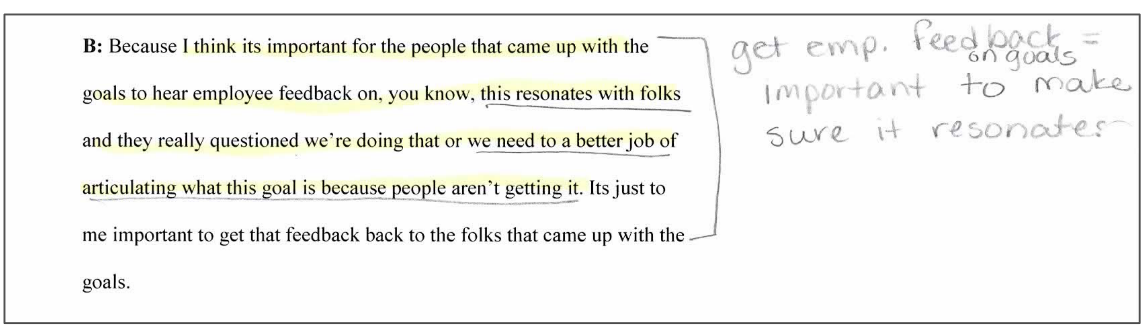
From the mind map, I identified eight clusters of ideas, with connections between several of the clusters. For example, the idea of trust arose both when participants talked about the outcomes of communicating strategic goals and as part of the general idea of communication. Listening was another idea that appeared in two idea clusters. The mind map gave me a place to refer back throughout the coding and analysis process and explore what ideas and concepts I thought were emerging – both in terms of what matched what I saw in the mind map and what contradicted it. That said, I took care not to allow the mind map to drive my data analysis, but rather used it as a tool to aid my thinking process.

Memos. Writing memos is an important part of grounded theory research, as it provides a method for the researcher to capture immediate reactions, thoughts and ideas as data collection takes place. Memos also provide an opportunity to do data comparison and initial data analysis that informs subsequent interviews and data collection. With this in mind, I began writing memos immediately following my initial interview. I wrote memos after each interview and while transcribing the interviews. I noted key observations, ideas, questions, patterns, comparisons, key words or phrases, things I wanted to remember and come back to, and any general feelings I had at the time.

My memos consisted mainly of written notes, which I could easily read back through as needed. I used my memos throughout the data analysis process to locate key ideas I had previously encountered, or to revisit pertinent questions. My memos also served as a way to identify and bracket out my personal feelings and bias throughout data collection and analysis.

Coding. Coding is the process of naming segments of data with a label that "categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data," and allows the researcher to make sense of the experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Coding my data allowed me to select, separate, and sort the data, which in turn led to the creation of categories that shaped the collection of further data during the interview process. Careful and thorough coding allowed me to bracket my bias or personal thoughts and feelings. By staying close to the data and what it presented, I was able to focus on the data and meaning and not on my associations and assumptions.

All interviews were transcribed to aid in the coding and data mining process. Transcriptions were done by me, which allowed me to stay close to the data and to analyze the data as I went along. I wrote memos during the transcription process to capture thoughts and emerging themes and to support the first phase of coding. I also highlighted key quotes from participants that supported themes or patterns that were emerging (see Figure 3.3). Lastly, I noted language participants used when describing how they communicated with employees, such as "he's the type of leader who…," "face-to-face," "people feel invested," "good leader," and "feel a part of it."


B: Because I think its important for the people that came up with the goals to hear employee feedback on, you know, this resonates with folks and they really questioned we're doing that or we need to a better job of articulating what this goal is because people aren't getting it. Its just to me important to get that feedback back to the folks that came up with the goals.

get emp. feedback on goals = important to make sure it resonates

Figure 3.3. Example of open coding and key quote highlighting

Open coding. I coded my data in three stages during analysis. For the first stage of coding, I used *initial* or *open coding*. Open coding identifies actions in each segment of data, and provides a close study of the data and allows ideas, themes, core categories, and sub-categories to emerge. During initial coding, I stayed close to the data by applying codes to individual lines or segments. *In vivo* codes, those that use direct participant language, also were used during initial coding to preserve participants' meaning and to identify common phrases and language used by all participants.

This stage of coding enabled me to ensure fit and relevance of my analysis by the emergence of core categories that had a clear relation to other categories and patterns I observed. The core categories identified during this stage have clear relationships with one another, aligning with the various steps of the communications process—both seen and unseen. These categories and the relationships among them formed the basis to the patterns and themes that informed theory development.

I began open coding after transcribing the first three interviews and continued to code the interviews as I completed each transcription. I coded each transcript using a combination of line-by-line coding and coding by phrase or complete thought. I used this blend of coding to capture each interviewee's complete thoughts or comments, which often were several lines long. After coding each interview, I wrote down what I thought were the key ideas and takeaways.

After coding my first interview, I met with my advisor to review the coding to get a third-party opinion to verify if I was maintaining the participant's thoughts or if I had implied too much in my coding. I used the feedback from this meeting to guide the rest of my coding, including focusing on summarizing the thought or statement of the participant using simple, clear language, while also maintaining the words or language used by the participant.

After I completed open coding for all interviews, I reviewed the data again and refined codes as needed for clarity and to remove any bias or assumptions I might impose on the data. At this point, I noticed six buckets of ideas that appeared to be consistent across the data:

1. Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals
2. Process (how to) leaders use for communicating strategic goals
3. Who is involved in the development of strategic goals
4. Leaders' perceptions of employees' needs
5. Leaders' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities
6. Leaders' personal learnings about communicating strategic goals

These "buckets" represented a set of larger concepts that bubbled up from the data regarding the different ways or topic areas participants used to talk about communicating strategic goals to employees. To test the strength of these idea buckets, I organized all of the open codes into tables using the six buckets along with supporting quotes from the text (see Figure 3.4). I organized the table so I could view the open codes in the context of the buckets, but also to easily conduct the next two steps of coding: focused and theoretical. I was able to assign all of the codes to one of the six buckets, validating that there was a data-based foundation to the buckets. The process of organizing all of the open codes into each of the six buckets resulted in additional clarity that led to refining and editing the name of each bucket to get to the final list shown in Table 3.1 below.

Focused coding. The second stage of coding used to analyze the data was *selective* or *focused coding*. This stage of coding generates more selective and conceptual codes that further synthesize data to provide a denser set of core categories. These denser categories help provide explanations to larger pieces of data (Charmaz, 2006). Focused coding also included continuing to examine the six buckets of ideas I had identified, how the buckets fit into my analysis of the data, and how they would influence the creation of a theory.

Table 3.1
Example of open codes organized into idea buckets with supporting quotes

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Bucket 1: Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals</th></tr>
<tr><th>Initial Coding</th><th>Focused Coding</th></tr>
<tr><td>Questions leader asks or employee asks are very important</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Have to sell the importance of strategic planning</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Be honest, transparent, and genuine</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">I had to learn to let people fail on their own and use those opportunities as learning experiences. Whereas in the past, I would have said screw it, I'll fix it myself. Because I didn't the give people the opportunity to fail. And I think that you know with any good strategy, sometimes there are going to be elements of it that are not going to go as you want. And so it's important for leaders to let things play out so that people feel more invested in it. And it’s ok if some parts of it fail or it’s ok if the communication goes poorly, as long you look at it as a learning experience. And understand that the strategy hasn't changed, it's just the way it was communicated made it not so agreeable. [Paul]

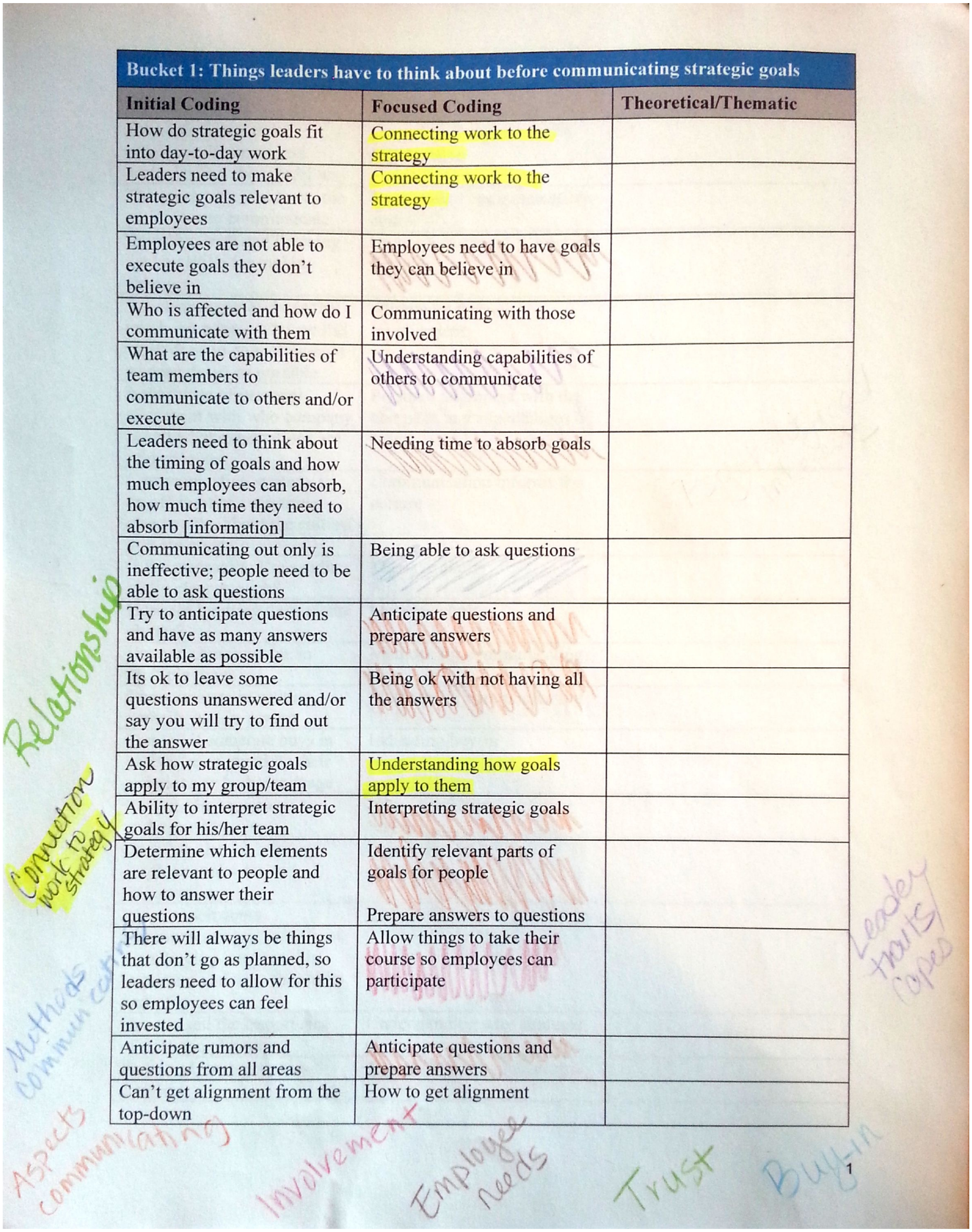
[At sales manager meeting], I tried to touch as many of these people that touch all the people that get the work done. It’s gaining alignment as deep down in the organization as you can I think is an important part of trying to communicate any sort of strategy. [Dan]</td></tr>
</table>

To conduct the focused coding, I built data tables with the six idea buckets and open codes, and worked through each bucket to generate a set of focused codes. For the focused codes, I used gerunds as much as possible while striving to capture the meaning conveyed (see Table 3.2). I coded the six buckets in sequential order, referencing the language and codes from the previous sections to build a consistent set of focused codes. As a result, I was able to identify a fairly consistent set of codes with only a few outliers.

Table 3.2.
Excerpt of focused coding

Bucket 1: Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals	
Initial Coding	**Focused Coding**
How do strategic goals fit into day-to-day work	Connecting work to the strategy
Who is affected and how do I communicate with them	Communicating with those involved
Ask how strategic goals apply to my group	Understanding how goals apply to them
The more trust you have, the easier it is to communicate	Trust makes communication easier
Empathy, trust and listening are key skills for making changes	Employing empathy, trust and listening
Is the messaging I'm sending clear enough?	Message clarity

With each open code now assigned a focused code, I organized the focused codes. To do this, I printed all of the data organized by the six idea buckets, read through each page and color coded the focused codes across all codes and idea buckets. Focused codes that conveyed the same meaning, were about the same topic, or had other similarities were marked with one color. For example, any focused code on any page that talked about relationships was colored green (see Figure 3.4).



Bucket 1: Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals		
Initial Coding	**Focused Coding**	**Theoretical/Thematic**
How do strategic goals fit into day-to-day work	Connecting work to the strategy	
Leaders need to make strategic goals relevant to employees	Connecting work to the strategy	
Employees are not able to execute goals they don't believe in	Employees need to have goals they can believe in	
Who is affected and how do I communicate with them	Communicating with those involved	
What are the capabilities of team members to communicate to others and/or execute	Understanding capabilities of others to communicate	
Leaders need to think about the timing of goals and how much employees can absorb, how much time they need to absorb [information]	Needing time to absorb goals	
Communicating out only is ineffective; people need to be able to ask questions	Being able to ask questions	
Try to anticipate questions and have as many answers available as possible	Anticipate questions and prepare answers	
Its ok to leave some questions unanswered and/or say you will try to find out the answer	Being ok with not having all the answers	
Ask how strategic goals apply to my group/team	Understanding how goals apply to them	
Ability to interpret strategic goals for his/her team	Interpreting strategic goals	
Determine which elements are relevant to people and how to answer their questions	Identify relevant parts of goals for people Prepare answers to questions	
There will always be things that don't go as planned, so leaders need to allow for this so employees can feel invested	Allow things to take their course so employees can participate	
Anticipate rumors and questions from all areas	Anticipate questions and prepare answers	
Can't get alignment from the top-down	How to get alignment	

Figure 3.4. Excerpt of color codes applied to focused codes

The subject assigned to each color was identified after I had colored 4-5 focused codes that were related to one another, and was based on what appeared to be the core meaning being relayed in the related focused codes. For example, in Figure 3.4 above, “Connecting work to strategy” and “Understanding how goals apply to them” both point to the need for leaders to demonstrate a relevant connection of the strategic goals to the employees’ day-to-day work (focused code: “Connecting work to strategy”). The result of this color-coding was a refined set of nine focused codes (see Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5. Color-coded focused codes.

Theoretical coding. The final stage of coding, *theoretical coding*, was a continuation of the second stage of coding core categories and where theory development began to emerge. Theoretical coding identifies possible relationships between categories of focused codes (Charmaz, 2006). During this phase, I examined how the six idea buckets identified during open coding and the nine focused codes generated during focused coding intersected. This intersection was evaluated by exploring how the focused codes could be grouped into a new set of patterns within each idea bucket (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3
Focused codes organized by idea bucket

Idea Bucket	Focused Codes
Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals	• Aspects of communicating • Buy-in • Connecting work to strategic goals • Employee needs • Involvement • Leader traits • Methods of communication • Relationship • Trust
Process (how to) leaders use for communicating strategic goals	• Aspects of communicating • Connecting work to strategic goals • Involvement • Leader traits • Methods of communication • Relationship • Trust
Who is involved in the development of strategic goals	• Connecting work to strategic goals • Employee needs • Involvement • Methods of communication
Leader’s perceptions of employees’ needs	• Connecting work to strategic goals • Employee needs • Involvement • Leader traits • Relationship • Trust
Leader’s perceptions of their roles and responsibilities	• Aspects of communicating • Connecting work to strategic goals • Employee needs • Leader traits • Relationship
Leader’s personal learnings about communicating strategic goals	• Aspects of communicating • Buy-in • Leader traits • Relationship • Trust

This examination of the intersection of codes and idea buckets was done by organizing the focused codes within the six idea buckets to determine if there was a logical connection between them, and to see if any focused codes had more prominence than others. This examination allowed me to see which idea buckets contained the most focused codes and which ones had the least. These results pointed to four of the idea buckets having greater prominence than the other two. Following this comparison, I analyzed how each of the idea buckets was supported by the data, specifically using direct quotes from the participants as proof points of the intersection of the data and resulting theory. I was able to identify narrative descriptions that provided an explanation of each of the idea buckets in the participants' own words through the use of participants' quotes.

Theory Development

Theory emergence. With data analysis complete, I began to review my findings to uncover a theoretical model to explain them. This involved reviewing all of the data in a holistic manner that took into account how the data became progressively more focused and gained deeper meaning through the coding process. All of the data generated a set of pieces that operated like a puzzle that I had to put together, but which lacked a picture to guide its completion. To identify the "picture" for the puzzle, I revisited my research question: How do leaders communicate strategic goals to employees? By bringing my research question forward again, I was able to focus on how my data answered the "how" in the question by looking for a process or set of actions that informed the communication of strategic goals. Using my research question as my "picture" allowed me to organize the data "puzzle pieces" into a theory that answered the question. Details of theory development are presented in Chapter 4.

Validation. To make sense of the theoretical model, I conducted a secondary literature review to cross-reference my potential theory with existing literature to test its validity. I also tested validity of my findings through discussions with my advisor, with a close friend, and by member checking in which I shared the theoretical model with study participants. I wanted to get participants' feedback on the model, and see if the theory resonated with them and whether the theory reflected the information they had shared with me about their experiences. Results of the literature review and member checking are presented in Chapter 5.

Researcher's Bias

It was very important for me to be aware of my potential biases in conducting this research because my personal connection to this topic is informed by my professional expertise in communication and by holding a leadership position within my organization. I took extra precautions to not allow my day-to-day work to influence my research and analysis. As noted above, I employed several steps to help avoid bias and to bracket any preconceptions I might have, or which could potentially influence data collection and analysis. This began with identifying potential areas of bias in advance, including that I work in the field of communications and have a leadership role in which I communicate strategic goals to others. From there, I used my memos and mind map to capture my thoughts and concepts as they arose. Memos allowed me to identify and bracket potential biases and preconceptions as I worked through my research. The mind map gave me a way of capturing my thoughts in a simple, graphic format that limited the ability to infuse bias. More on specifics of how my bias was helpful and potentially unhelpful are presented in Chapter 5.

Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were required to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed in compliance with the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB). All information provided by participants was kept confidential, including their names, names of their organizations, and names of any work colleagues referenced during interviews. To ensure the confidentiality of participant information, the list of all participants in this study was stored on my personal computer and was password protected. Printed copies of this list and any data collected were stored in a locked file cabinet in my home. I was the only person who had access to the computer and its password, and the file cabinet. Neither the actual names of the participants nor the names of their organizations were used in this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Organizations, both for-profit and nonprofit, spend a lot of time and energy to develop strategies to grow and expand their business. Employees at all levels of the organization play an important role in achieving these strategies and growth. This means that all members of an organization must have a clear understanding of the strategy and its objectives, and must actively participate in executing the strategies to achieve those objectives. The participation in and execution of the strategies becomes critical to the ultimate success of the organization.

While engaging employees in organizational strategies may seem simple and logical, it can be one of the most challenging activities an organization takes on. Most often development of organizational strategies and goals is conducted at the highest levels of an organization. Participation in the development of organizational strategies is generally limited to top executives, with middle managers included on occasion. The executive leaders spend weeks and months reviewing data, analyzing the business and the industry, discussing options for innovation and growth, and eventually generate a set of strategic goals to drive the organization forward.

Communicating the strategic goals developed by the executive leaders to employees becomes the task of both the leaders and middle managers within the organization. How leaders and managers communicate these goals can have a great impact on whether employees understand the strategies and engage with executing them. One of the main issues that arises when communicating strategic goals to employees is the lack of employee participation in the development of the goals, which would naturally contribute greatly to their understanding of the goals. This lack of participation places even more onus on the leaders, who need to communicate the goals with enough detail to allow employees to understand the objectives of the strategic goals and the reasoning behind them.

The focus of this grounded theory study is to understand the process leaders use to communicate strategic goals in pursuit of securing employee understanding of and engagement with the goals. This chapter provides the findings of this study and begins with a description of the study participants. The next section of the chapter is a review of the data coding and analysis process, through which themes that informed theory development were generated. The chapter concludes with a developed theory on how leaders communicate strategic goals.

Study Participants

This study included nine participants employed at organizations from a range of industries, both for-profit and nonprofit. The participants held various leadership and managerial positions within their organizations and had been in these positions for varied lengths of time. All participants lived and worked in Minnesota at the time of the interviews. Participants' employers included both local and national organizations (see Table 4.1). Criteria for participation in this study and how participants were selected for the study are detailed in Chapter 3.

The professional experience of participants ranged both in the number of years at their current organization and the number of years in which they had managed employees who reported to them directly. The variation in the types organizations at which they worked provided a level of diversity in the type of leadership roles and number of direct reports participants managed. Seven of the participants had held multiple leadership positions throughout their professional careers in which they had communicated strategic goals to employees. The remaining two participants had only one leadership position (their current roles) in which they had communicated strategic goals to direct reports. To maintain confidentiality, I have assigned a pseudonym to each interview participant.

Table 4.1
Overview of study participants and their organizations in chronological order by the date in which they were interviewed

Participant	Title	Years in Position	Industry	Company Size	# of Direct Reports
1. Paul	Vice President	6	PR & Marketing	120	4
2. Olivia	Chief Compliance Officer	2	Health Care	50,000+	12
3. Richard	Vice President	4	Manufacturing	2000+	2
4. Rob	CEO & Co-Founder	11	Health & Fitness	100	5
5. Dan	General Manager	5	Manufacturing	9,000	8
6. Betty	Artistic Director & Co-Founder	15	Nonprofit	12	5
7. Eric	Business Program Department Chair	2	Education	200	10
8. Edward	Vice President	1	Health Care	14,000	5
	Adjunct Professor	2	Education	500+	4
9. Delia	Board Chair	5	Nonprofit	>20	6

During each interview, participants provided details about their experiences communicating strategic goals to employees. Many of the participants opted to describe experiences at their current organizations as well as in previous leadership positions. One participant (Edward) held two active positions at the time of our interview and provided insights from his experiences at both organizations. Allowing him to speak about both positions allowed for direct comparison of the experiences from his personal perspective. I included data he shared about both experiences, although only the second position qualified him to participate in the study based on the requirement that participants had to be at their current organization for a minimum of two years.

Analysis Process

Data analysis is a constant and ongoing process in grounded theory, which begins with the first interview. I constructed my analysis process around the understanding that each of the steps in my research process would lead to insights that would eventually inform theory development, starting with interviews, then coding, and finally the actual analysis. Understanding that my analysis would follow this approach led me to incorporate several measures to capture thoughts and insights throughout my research so I would not lose any elements of analysis during the process. These measures included writing memos during the interview and transcription processes, creating a mind map, and coding the data in three phases (see Figure 4.1).

MEMOS Capture initial thoughts, ideas and patterns from interviews Identify modifications or additional questions for subsequent interviews	**MIND MAP** Visually capture key words, phrases and ideas Ability to see clusters of ideas Provided alternative format for organizing data	**TRANSCRIPTIONS** Capture new ideas as they emerge Verify patterns, including identifying changes or new patterns
INITIAL CODING Start to crystallize data into codes that validate or negate ideas and patterns Identify new data that fills in gaps or generates new ideas and patterns	**FOCUSED CODING** Identify commonalities in initial codes that help form focused codes Generate larger buckets of ideas that demonstrate deeper meaning of codes	**THEORETICAL CODING** Review codes, patterns and data holistically to identify themes and theoretical concepts Theory development and validation

Figure 4.1 Overview of my data analysis process.

I opted to break away from Charmaz's recommended process of coding each interview before conducting the next interview. I made this decision in order to complete all of my interviews within one month because of the need to take time off from work to conduct the interviews. Many of my interviews were scheduled in December 2013 when participants had availability, and I did not want to miss the opportunity to interview anyone who had expressed interest in participating in my research. Additionally, I was not able to transcribe and code each interview before conducting the next interview because of the amount of time it took to transcribe each interview. Several of my interviews occurred on consecutive days or on the same day, which prevented transcription and coding before the next interview.

In order to conduct some level of analysis between interviews, I wrote a memo after each interview, allowing me to capture key ideas and concepts, which I then used to determine if I needed to modify or add questions for the subsequent interview. I also created a mind map to organize ideas and concepts in a visual manner to supplement the memos. Using the memos and mind map together allowed me to see patterns and ideas as they arose and to tailor subsequent interviews based on these insights, in keeping with Charmaz's recommended approach. I continued to write memos and add to the mind map while transcribing the interviews. Finally, I conducted three phases of coding—initial, focused, and theoretical coding—which then led to theory development.

Findings

The findings for this study emerged in three phases. The first phase was the process of understanding how participants communicated strategic goals, which resulted from a direct analysis of their responses to the research question. An analysis of the data that specified the tactical steps of communication described by participants resulted in a refined list of eight tenets that guided participants' communications process. The second phase uncovered key themes from the data that emerged in addition to the process steps and tenets from the first phase of findings. This phase examined deeper meanings within the data to produce seven themes. The third phase combined insights from the first two into six large buckets of ideas. These buckets of ideas provided new ways to organize coded data that allowed the theoretical model to emerge. The remainder of this chapter presents the details of each phase of findings.

Tenets for communicating strategic goals. At the start of each interview, I had participants tell me about the process they used to communicate strategic goals. Many of them immediately talked about the tools and tactics they used, with a few of them circling back to this topic later in the interview. Each participant provided four to six specific tools or tactics they used (see Table 4.2). Common across all of the interviews was the use of multiple methods for communicating, including in-person, with individuals, with groups, via email, and by phone. Several of the participants cited this use of multiple methods as "layering communications." By using various methods of communication, participants are able to accommodate the varied learning and communication styles of their employees as well as deliver the message multiple times.

> *Everybody hears and receives information differently. To serve people, they need to hear directly from their supervisor or from, you know, the leader of that group, who will tell them face to face, "This is what happened. Here's why it happened," and give them a chance to vent. Others get an email, they at look it, and are like, "Ok, I'm pragmatic, I'm moving on with my life. I get it." I think that's where companies can miss out on how they communicate to people because they think it's one size fits all, and that's not true.* (Paul, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Table 4.2
Communications tactics as described by participants

Dan	• Video messages • Regular emails • Standard meetings • Quarterly branch meetings • Phone conversations
Eric	• Meetings • Email • One-on-one; go to individuals to check in • Informal conversations
Edward	• In-person • Email • Meetings • Non-traditional methods
Olivia	• Emails • One-on-one meetings with individuals • Team meetings • Quarterly conference calls with entire division
Paul	• Prepare; anticipate questions and test messages • Cascade communications; communicate in multiple ways • Get feedback and follow up
Richard	• High-level preview to prepare for meeting • Face-to-face via team meetings; ask questions and get feedback • Follow up with individuals
Rob	• Frequent emails • Regular meetings • Tell stories, use analogies • Listening
Delia	• Emails • Monthly meetings • Phone conversations • Meeting notes and documents

The process for communicating strategic goals was not just about telling employees what the goals are, but also about gauging understanding of the goals. Several participants described ways in which they gauged understanding and their efforts to make sure employees comprehend the goals.

> *I like to [communicate strategic goals] face-to-face, number one. I like to gauge reactions and get feedback, number two. Do they understand what we're trying to say? Because if you're in a smoke-filled room and you're working on [the goals] for days or weeks at a time, you sort of can't see the forest for the trees sometimes. So if the way it's communicated isn't clear to someone who hasn't been through the process, [they won't understand]. Those are the things I try to get done when I'm communicating strategic goals.* (Richard, personal communication, December 9, 2013)

> *[At my sales manager meeting], I tried to touch as many of these people that touch all the people that get the work done. It's gaining alignment as deep down in the organization as you can — I think it's an important part of trying to communicate any sort of strategy.* (Dan, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Olivia talked at length about the process of learning to communicate strategic goals while simultaneously implementing what she was learning and bringing her employees along. In my memo for this interview, I noted eight points she made about how to communicate strategic goals to employees, most of which reflected points also made by Paul:

1. Knowing your audience
2. Recognizing "layers" of communication

3. Working towards buy-in
4. Being ok with having not having everyone be a fan [of the plan/goals]
5. Asking questions and being willing to listen
6. Being aware of one's leadership style
7. Knowing how much information to share and when
8. Helping employees know their role and how it fits into the larger strategy

These points were the start of a pattern that emerged around the process leaders used to communicate, and the things they took into consideration when planning how to communicate with employees. I noted these points as important to look for in subsequent interviews—whether all of the tenets appeared, or if they did not, what appeared in their place or to contradict these themes.

My interviews with Richard and Dan built upon the eight tenets I had noted in the previous two interviews, while also providing new insights that led to additional clarity about some of the tenets. Building on insights from the first four interviews, I examined the remaining five interviews for additional data about these eight tenets. This examination confirmed that all eight tenets held true across the totality of the data, and also allowed me to refine several of them. Table 4.3 shows the progression of the tenets as I refined them after analyzing each interview.

By organizing the data about these tenets, I could see that the initial list of steps provided by participants (Table 4.3) only included surface-level tactical steps for communicating. Olivia's interview was the impetus for evaluating the other interviews to see if and how these eight tenets appeared, which unveiled richer data. The result of evaluating all of the interviews for similar sentiments produced a set of tenets that speaks to a deeper meaning and laid the foundation for themes to emerge.

Table 4.3.
Tenets for communicating strategic goals

Initial List of Tenets	After Fourth Interview	After Final Interview
Knowing your audience	Knowing your audience	Knowing your audience
“Layers” of communication	“Layers” of communication	Layering communications
Working towards buy-in	Working towards buy-in; people need to believe in the strategy	Working towards buy-in; people need to believe in the strategy
Being ok with not having everyone be a fan [of the plan/goals]	Testing messages	Testing messages with internal confidants
Asking questions and being willing to listen	Asking questions and being willing to listen	Asking questions and being willing to listen
Leadership style	Leadership style	Leadership style; assumptions about what a leader does
How much information to share and when	How much information to share and when	Knowing how much information to share and when
Helping employees know their role and how it fits into the larger strategy	Helping employees know their role and how it fits into the larger strategy; relevance	Relevance of what is being communicated to the individual and his/her role

It is important to note here that it could have been easy to skip over this list of tenets from Olivia as she was the only participant who listed them so clearly and because they were so specific to her experience. However, heeding Charmaz’s (2006) directions to attend to language, I focused on how she described the process she was learning because there were thoughts and sentiments that echoed my first interview with Paul. This attention to language also supported the grounded theory process of constant comparison and data analysis at each step in the process.

Themes. After analyzing the tactics and tenets participants used for communicating strategic goals, I turned to examining the coded data. A set of themes was identified using both the coded data and the tenets for communicating strategic goals. I built upon and refined these themes with each phase of data coding.

Experiences of leaders communicating strategic goals. My first interview was with Paul and it laid the groundwork for all subsequent interviews. In this interview I was able to test my starting set of questions, determine how to modify questions, and identify additional questions to be included in future interviews. Specifically, this interview led to two additional questions for subsequent participants: a) What is the experience of leaders when strategic goals were communicated to them? and b) What happened if communicating strategic goals to their employees or direct reports did not go well? These additional interview questions helped gather richer data during subsequent interviews, which as I believe, helped achieve saturation sooner than if these questions had not been included.

I added these two questions because I noted new information and richer data was provided when Paul talked about these topics during his interview. The flow of my interview protocol changed as result of having Paul provide some examples of times when strategic goals were communicated to him and when his communication of strategic goals to others did not go well. He was able to provide more context around how he communicated with employees and he expressed insights he gained from negative experiences he had while communicating strategic goals.

A great example of [communicating well] was when we had the downturn in the economy. And we came back after the New Year and [the president of the office] got everyone in a room, and said, "Hey, here's what's happening. We're probably not losing clients, but they don't have a lot of money. We're not laying anybody off, but we're not doing any salary increases this year." That was a good process: get up in front of people, get them thinking about it, and give them a chance to then go back to their strategic leads in their offices and ask questions directly. And then there was an email that went out about it. It was kind of an ongoing communication pattern. And I think that's the best way you make sure you tamp down any rumors, any opportunities for people to raise red flags.

The reverse of that is how it doesn't work. We had layoffs this year. The communication was poor. We were sent an email about why this was happening. Now, individually a few of us heard about it ahead of time because we are in positions of authority, but we weren't allowed to go and tell our staff what was happening. And that has still, to this point six months later, raised a lot of questions. A lot of people are uncertain what is happening. So, from a strategic point of view, that was a very poor way of dealing with it. And we are still digging out from that six months later.

What happens when the strategy is wrong is that it just prolongs the number of questions and uncertainty among the staff. And it hurts buy-in… When it's communicated poorly, and staff aren't given a chance to absorb it, it takes that much longer to implement. And then you're coming to back to "let's create another strategy."

> *What didn't happen was that layering [of communications] I was talking about. There were too many questions that were left unanswered after the fact. It was like we did this really difficult thing, and we know everybody's upset. Then a month later, everything's fine. Everything is back to normal. We're just not going to talk about it. And to me, you can't sweep those things under the rug. There needs to be more ongoing communication.* (Paul, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

The emotions Paul expressed and the reflective nature of his speech during the interview indicated that these were important experiences for him. Paul's reflection also indicated a level of complexity around communication and concern about the results of these experiences that I had not anticipated. There were genuine emotions involved in these experiences for him in regards to how these communications affected employees. Specifically, because these examples of communications had not gone well or been done in the way he believed they should have, there were ongoing issues. He did not believe that leaders had attended to the needs of employees during these communications.

Understanding employee needs and generating buy-in. Attending to and understanding the needs of employees was a strong theme in many of the interviews, with participants speaking about it multiple times and emphasizing the need to demonstrate the relevance of strategic goals to an employee's job. Connecting strategic goals to the larger vision or mission of the organization, as well as to the employee's specific role, allows individuals to see how they fit into the bigger picture.

> *It's all about how do you get everyone in alignment and pulling the rope in the same direction. You can't do that from the top down. I've never seen it really be successful in a*

business, especially when there are so many people involved and every job matters. Everyone has to understand what their sole responsibility is, and how what they do affects the person in front of them and the person behind them in the process. If any part of it is broken, it becomes pretty evident pretty quickly. (Dan, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Another part of understanding employee needs is how much information to provide so employees feel informed. Olivia and Paul noted the need to prevent or stamp out rumors by communicating about things that are happening, and about how it is important to know how much information is enough and when it is too much. Too little information creates rumors and questions, whereas too much information can lead to employees feeling confused and overwhelmed. These insights were important because both shared experiences in which they had shared too little or too much information, and how doing so affected the communications process.

I think any good leader has a pretty good pulse of their staff. Some of that becomes the old cliché of the gut reaction. [When communicating the reasons for a strategy], I would determine which elements are going to have the most relevance to people. And it goes back to how do you answer all the questions. If I've got 15 reasons, then I've got 15 different ways to answer the questions, and probably a lot more than that if you interpret them in different ways. And so for one employee it might be I have to use all 15 of them. For another, it might be two.

> *So I think you use your own judgment. You make a determination on what your staff needs to hear. And you wield those as you would any good talking point—I pull out that talking point for that person and just how much do they need to know. And I would also say that if the company has decided that these 15 reasons are something shareable, then there's no reason why you couldn't use all of them. But you also have to understand just how much people can absorb, too. More information is not necessarily a better thing for people sometimes.* (Paul, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

> *What I've learned in moving chairs at that table from being a contributing member to being a lead is… at the beginning and end of every day, after every meeting, to think FYI - who above me needs to know, who at my level needs to know, who that reports to me on my team needs to know. Who needs to know is something that I never paid much attention to until I was in this leadership role having to manage and motivate [people to achieve] these strategic goals. Just the raw necessity to communicate the facts, the conclusions from meetings, the visions, the goals of my leadership to my peers has just been a huge skill that I can see is absolutely necessary. I can see it's also one that I have to continue to really work on. But that's so important to keep people on the same page.* (Olivia, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

The ability of participants to put themselves in the position of the employees to understand employee needs was also an element of this theme. Putting themselves in the mindset of the employee helped participants identify potential questions that might arise and ways to connect the strategic goals to the employee's individual job. Being in this mindset also helped them anticipate how employees might feel when receiving these communications, which helped the participants adjust their message or the method of communication. The ultimate result of these efforts was that participants strived to communicate strategic goals in a way that resonated with employees and would ideally lead to buy-in.

> *You [help employees understand strategic goals] by being able to spend time with them. Being able to share with them why this is good for the overall organization. "Maybe these are not important to your area or specific department, but to be successful as an organization, we have to move in this direction." You try to get them to buy into that. You try to be transparent. You try to give them all the information and challenge them to think broadly.* (Edward, personal communication, December 27, 2013)

> *Are they buying in? There's body language. There's questions. Within days, you feel it. You get these little emails or someone may come up and ask a side question. But I think there's a feel…I can really get a feel for what is going on in the building if people have questions or concerns. We have frequent meetings around here, so stuff has a way of bubbling up to the surface. So I can tell, hey, I didn't do a good job of getting that across, or this has come up and now I need to tackle this issue. It's part science, part gut. In meetings, when you're talking about stuff, you can tell if someone totally buys in or they're engaged, or if they're just sort of bought in. You can tell by their questions or by their body language. You can just tell in the interaction. I think leaders do a pretty good job of picking up on those nuances, and then saying, "You know, I don't think we're totally clear here. Let's continue to investigate this." Because maybe there's something they're not telling me that I need to [look into]. What's holding them back*

> *from what we are trying to achieve here? You just have to keep asking questions.* (Rob, personal communication, December 12, 2013)

> *I believe for any good leader there is an art to understanding; that you need to look around to see who is struggling with it, who wants to ask a question and is afraid to. And you either draw them out in the meeting or you ask them afterwards. Or, who's in the meeting who doesn't give a shit. And there's always those people sitting there like I don't really care.* (Paul, personal communication, December 4, 2013).

These quotes also described how participants gauged whether employees understood the goals being communicated, how they observed whether buy-in was taking place, and if more clarification or information was needed. Both Rob and Paul discuss paying attention to body language and "reading the room" when communication is happening. Additionally, they and other participants sought confirmation of understanding and buy-in of goals through feedback from employees both in formal settings such as team meetings and informal settings such as side conversations in hallways.

Relationships with employees. At this point, I re-read Charmaz's (2006) description of how to analyze data, which helped me think about the process of interviewing in context of the themes. The phrase "attend closely to respondents' feelings and views" (p. 34) gave me a lens to look through and take note of not just the language study participants used, but also their tone of voice and nuances of how they described communicating strategic goals.

In my memos for the interviews with Richard and Dan, I identified the need to listen more to participants' tone of voice to get a deeper understanding of the meaning. Richard and

Dan both talked about the level of relationships they developed with employees and discussed the need to have regular contact with their direct reports. However, both also talked about sensitivities that need to be taken into account in building these relationships. Dan described the parameters he established in order to have an effective relationship with his employees so they could successfully do their work, but also to ensure the relationships did not cross boundaries.

> *I have a different kind of relationship [with each of my direct reports]. I know them really well personally. I would consider them all good friends. Not just friends, but good friends…I talk to them often. One of them I probably talk to every day. There's two or three that I talk to two or three times a week. We're all trying to move the business forward together. I kind of view myself as the first among peers, and not really the boss, if you will. I try to be more equals than anything else. I'm just the one that carries the water here at corporate and tries to get obstacles out of their way and help them be successful. It's important to me to have people on my team that I connect with and trust.* (Dan, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Richard brought a different perspective to the relationship topic as he talked about being authentic in his communications. He described how there was a "different feeling behind it" when he was genuine in his communications, and that a leader needs to be frank and transparent because employees can read through promises they know the leader cannot keep. I noted that the words he used to describe communications—authentic, genuine, transparent—were also words that can be applied to relationships.

> *If you're talking to the employees who are working at the factory [that was going to be closed], there's obviously a tremendous amount of depth that you go into on how the*

decision the was made and why it was made. There's a lot of empathy and sympathy in the way it's communicated because those people are ultimately going to lose their jobs. And you go into a lot of depth around what kind of support both the company and the state or city can give to workers as they transition into something new. Whereas the communication at the factories that are going to remain open, or with the sales staff or whatever, doesn't go into that level of depth, I would say. Obviously it's an important topic for everybody, but it's not as important to the people who aren't really impacted in their day-to-day life.

When you're completely behind something, and you feel passionate about it, I think that comes out more in your communication. You just feel more genuine with what you're talking about. I think that probably resonates to employees as well. I think it's hard to fake authenticity and genuine enthusiasm. Probably not intentionally, but just, it's just human nature, in my opinion. Or at least it is for me. I'm a sales person, so I can kind of fake it a little bit, but I think there's a different feeling behind it. (Richard, personal communication, December 9, 2013)

Trust was also a large part of the conversations with participants about building relationships with employees. Employee trust in the leader is a key part of building relationships and having authentic communication with employees. Building trust as part of the relationship between leaders and employees opens up communication and can foster understanding.

[Spending time with employees is] how you build relationships and that's how you build trust. And there's really no other way to do it. Which is challenging when you have a big organization. Communications through emails and through different methods is always

interpreted a little bit different by each person. And quite often if they haven't seen the stuff leading up to the communication, it's probably not without some level of questioning. Leaders have to spend time with people at all areas of employment to build relationships and trust. (Edward, personal communication, December 27, 2013)

Additionally, trust is about leaders trusting employees to be an active part in achieving the strategic goals. Betty described this approach to trust in a story about growing her organization and learning how to let others be part of the growth:

There was a conversation I had with an associate where she talked about being trusted to do things, and it made me look at this idea in a different way. Trusting people to do these other jobs. The more that they invest their time, the more ownership they will have over things. And especially investing time into the decision-making process. So it's not just about, "I'm going to invest my time by doing a bunch of shitty jobs, but I'm going to invest my time by having an authority over decision-making processes." That higher stake is good…People are stepping up to the plate and taking those jobs and doing it. People are investing more of themselves in the jobs that they do. And they care more about it. And I'm trusting them to do their job. And because of that [we are growing] towards being a bigger organization because it's not a one-woman show anymore. (Personal communication, December 14, 2103)

Testing messages with confidants. Related to the discussion of trust was the theme that emerged around testing messages with confidants. While Paul initially brought this idea to light in his interview, subsequent interviews helped define it and point to the need to not just test messages, but the idea that this testing had to be done with internal confidants. These internal confidants were people within the participants' department or organization whom they trusted and whom they knew would provide them with thoughtful and useful feedback.

> *I believe for any good leader there is an art to creating understanding [for employees] … To do that, even before you go into a bigger group meeting, I have confidants within my sphere that I will bounce things off of ahead of time. I would go into their office and say, "Here's the issue, here's what's going on, and here's what I'm going to say. What do you think?" And I think that good leaders anywhere within any organization have those people that they can go to and be a sounding board, even if you're kind of breaking confidence of telling someone ahead of time. That's ok. It happens all the time and you need to have somebody there who's got your back and can give you good feedback. Because there's lots of times where I thought I've had a pretty good idea, and I shared it with someone and they either validated that I was on the right track, or "Nope, you can't say it that way. Here's what you need to do; here's the way you need to change it."* (Paul, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Internal confidants also serve as secondary messengers or "informal leaders" to help communicate strategic goals. Because these confidants have had the opportunity to hear the information ahead of time, ask questions, and provide feedback, they are well-suited to help communicate it to others who will likely have the same questions. They are also positioned to help leaders by showcasing their buy-in and getting others on board. Case in point is this example from Dan about communicating a strategic goal that had financial implications that actually worked in favor of employees, but did not go over well because employees did not fully understand the reasons for the change.

> *In retrospect, what I should have done is gotten more reps on board sooner and say, "This is what we're thinking about doing, what do you think?" I'm not sure if it would have changed the outcome much, but even minor change—or at least what we view as minor—can have a major change management impact on the [sales] reps… Having them involved to hear what is the process we've gone through, share their options, and ask, "what do you think?" Let them give feedback and sometimes we'll modify things before we roll it out.*
>
> *I won't do that with the broader group. I usually handpick some of the informal leaders in the group to get some feedback. And then I'll use them to help me sell it in and communicate it as we roll it out to the broader audience. It's critical you get feedback and input from the people affected by the change rather than just dumping change on them. Sometimes you have to [dump it on them]—the business dictates that. But usually you don't*. (Personal communication, December 13, 2013)

How participants perceive the role of leaders. Another theme that became clearer throughout the second half of my interviews was the concept of leadership style and what the role of a leader is. All of the participants discussed their perceptions of what it means to be a good leader by sharing thoughts about what a leader does or should do, making this theme one of the largest and most in-depth.

In these discussions, participants referred to both themselves and how they acted as a leader, as well as the behaviors they believed leaders in general should exhibit. But not just any leader, “good leaders” as some participants specifically noted. In most of the interviews, I observed that participants described their leadership roles as being a collaborator to guide execution of goals, versus solely as a dictator, who gives orders and expects employees to execute those orders. This perception appeared to influence their leadership style and how they communicate in general with employees.

> *You learn a lot when you are in a position where you need to know. I'm actually in a position now where I need people to FYI me. I can't do my job, I will look bad, and I will lack credibility if people don't keep me in the loop. I need my reports keeping me in the loop on significant stuff. I need my colleagues keeping me in the loop. So, you know, what's good for the goose is good for the gander. I'm finally learning what it means to need that kind of relationship. It’s hard and I've certainly made some mistakes, and I'll make lots more I'm sure.* (Olivia, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

> *The leaders that I have been around or mentored under, it was always, “You’re getting paid X amount to figure this out and to get this done, so you better come up with the answer. You better know what you are doing, and you better never show people that you don’t know what you’re doing because they are coming to you for answers. That’s why you’re in the position.” And really now my view on that is just the opposite. People come to me so that I can help them through a process to get to a better outcome. Not only do I not have the answers, I tell them I am not the expert. We’re going to figure this out together, we’re going to talk with people and do small groups and whatever. It’s going to take longer, but in the end it will be a better product. That is a huge shift from my thinking of years ago.* (Edward, personal communication, December 27, 2013)

> *I think part of being a good leader is allowing other people to do their jobs. I think that collaboration, true collaboration, is I do my job and you do your job, and together our jobs both get done. What do I need to do to help you do your job? What do you need from me in order to make your job easier?* (Betty, personal communication, December 14, 2013)

I noticed that the experiences of the participants in communicating strategic goals often influenced how they communicated to others, as well as participants' perception of their role as a leader. For example, I could sense moments of frustration and disappointment when Paul described how one of his executive leaders used to do a great job of communicating with his smaller team, but after being promoted and having to communicate to whole organization, the communications skills of this leader were no longer effective. For Paul, this was a learning moment because he had appreciated how his leader had put in the time and effort to build relationships with team members and had an "open door policy" that invited employees to come talk to him about issues. But when this leader was promoted, these behaviors were no longer used because of the breadth of his new responsibilities and increased number of employees he oversaw. Paul's observations did not indicate that he thought less of this leader, but acknowledged how this leader had to shift his communication style in order to align with his new role.

> *I think first and foremost that great leaders have empathy. I always try to put myself in the shoes of our employees. If I'm an employee and I work in a certain department, how do I feel? What's going on? And does this potential change affect my role or how does it*

impact me? And why should I care? Why should I care if the company is moving in this direction? So, when I try to build communication, I try to do it from their perspective, not necessarily my perspective, or not necessarily the company's perspective. (Rob, personal communication, December 12, 2013)

I think good leaders figure out how each person needs to be communicated with and how they can fit into the ultimate goal of the organization. (Paul, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Lastly, Olivia provided a unique set of data about her role as a leader because this was the first position in her career in which she managed other employees, whereas all the other study participants had had various management or supervisory roles in their careers. Olivia was able to provide thoughtful commentary on learning how to communicate with her employees about general topics, as well as about strategic goals, and how this communication influenced how she showed up as a leader in her organization.

I had never supervised a single person or department or group in my life [before this position]. I had no idea the meaning of that… I have learned so much and I have come to respect that skill set immensely. I've sat across the table my whole career from the leader, and I've had a place at some pretty high tables as the lawyer… I realize now it's way harder than I thought it was looking at [my leader] across the table.

I'm really trying to help move my group to be more formal. What's worked in communicating and helping people get on board with a pretty major change in just how *we do our jobs, is what my expectations are, how they will be reviewed, and that I will do reviews. I'll do formal reviews every year. I meet with them. One thing that I think has worked really well [in communicating this strategy] is an annual plan. I have found that to be super important so that we're on the same page of what our priorities are. And so that we have buy-in. And just even in a year and half, we've come so far from that.* (Olivia, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

In discussing her transition to this leadership role, Olivia talked about working with an executive coach who was helping her understand communication styles and how to build rapport with her direct reports. Working with the coach was a “huge” learning for her, as she had never had to think about communicating in this manner before, in which rapport with others was necessary. Olivia’s organization uses the True Colors Personality Test to help leaders and employees understand their communications styles. Her results showed that she is mostly “green,” which is analytical, calm, collected, investigative, and conceptual; she does not exhibit any “blue,” which is sympathetic, personal, communicative, and compassionate (True Colors International, 2015). One of the main areas the coach is assisting her with is being less “green.”

I am non-relationship person. We do the colors test…I have virtually no blue. Literally no blue. This job has eked every bit of blue in me. When I started, I had one-on-one [meetings] with each of my direct reports. I originally thought, "Oh, this is going to kill me. But this is what I am going to do to get to know people." And after the first quarter, we'll change it to quarterly or something. Those scheduled one-on-ones have been great in terms of what's worked to communicate strategic plans. Having a collective plan and meeting individually with direct reports who need to execute it has been huge. From the

> *beginning, I started gently with just their individual goals with respect to either their geographic area or subject matter area. And we had some interesting discussions.* (Olivia, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Self-awareness and reflection of participants. Within the data that addressed what leaders are or do, I noted there was a level of self-awareness among my participants that created a reflective tone to the information they shared. This set of data and ideas added a new layer of information to my analysis. Study participants not only applied their own thoughts and ideas to the process of communicating with employees, but they also incorporated behaviors, learned from previous experiences or observed from their leaders or managers, that they believed worked well. The takeaway from this part of my analysis was that my study participants had taken the approach of building and utilizing a set of best practices for communicating strategic goals.

> *I had to learn to let people fail on their own and use those opportunities as learning experiences. Whereas in the past, I would have said screw it, I'll fix it myself. I didn't give people the opportunity to fail. I think that with any good strategy, there are going to elements of it that are not going to go as you want. And it's important for leaders to let things play out so that people feel more invested in it. And it's ok if some parts of it fail or it's ok if the communication goes poorly, as long you look at it as a learning experience.* (Paul, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

> *My boss had a good way [of communicating]. I tried to model interactions with my people based on him. He would just come to you and say, "How's everything going?" We would have lunch and rehash it. A lot of it is outside the formal channels. He had a great*

way of doing that. And I have found I like to be treated that way. When you go outside this formality there is a sense that you can voice your concerns and your reservations that you would otherwise not do in front of the other department members or in front of a larger forum. In fact, that is what I did when I was in the military and at [my former company]. I had four managers working for me and we would go out every week for breakfast or coffee. I learned that from him. (Eric, personal communication, December 14, 2013)

I think some of my mistakes in the early years were not recognizing the overlap [between boss and friend] … It's always remembering what hat you're wearing when. And just recognizing that professionalism is really important… I learned how to be a director by watching directors work who were in larger budget houses than I was able to afford. And so I modeled my behavior as a director after them. I learned how to be a director from bigger experiences and more professional organizations. (Betty, personal communication, December 14, 2013)

Communicating strategic goals with volunteers. Delia and Betty's experience were unique to this set of participants in that they both held leadership roles within nonprofit arts organizations. The structure of the organizations provided two sets of "employees" to be considered: the staff that were employed by the organization to manage the day-to-day business, and the board of directors who provided strategic oversight and management. Both sets of "employees" consisted of mainly volunteers in various roles, with one or two paid employees.

The structure of these organizations added a layer of complexity to how strategic goals were developed and also how they were communicated. Both Betty and Delia experienced the same challenges that were presented in the themes idea buckets noted in this chapter. However, both participants described the additional challenges of communication and buy-in that accompany working with volunteers. These challenges include lack of commitment, lack of participation, lack of follow through, and limited ability to discipline or enforce consequences. On the flip side of this are the volunteers who are wholly committed and go above and beyond what is asked of them. These committed volunteers operate very similarly to engaged employees, responding to and needing both aspects of the two-petal communications model: tactical interactions and relationship building. While these findings were not significant to enough to generate a theme, they did warrant attention because of the added complexity of two sets of "employees" with whom participants had to engage.

> *This is a nonprofit board that is ripping staples out of the floor. To [have us] think at the 40,000-foot level and do strategic planning is hard when you're involved in, "Oh my god, where is the money coming from this month to pay payroll?" It's very hard, and [our consultant] pushed us to look strategically [at what we need to do] … To look at things and assess if they meet our mission and vision… [Our consultant] wanted [the strategic plan] done as a whole board, and I found that very inefficient. And when push came to shove, it was the executive committee and him. And in his world, he wants the board commitment done and everybody to sign it—100% buy-in. Which all of us on every board would want from a good board member. But when you're trying to pull together meetings and people have jobs and you're a volunteer board, you just can't expect 100% commitment. You can't expect this from a lot of board members, which I find hard.* (Delia, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Verifying themes with the mind map. Throughout my analysis, I used the mind map in conjunction with my transcriptions and coding to visually analyze the data. The mind map gave me a way to see where ideas and concepts might be stronger or have more substance. I considered ideas stronger when more than one participant referenced the same idea, or when a participant added more depth to already existing ideas. The mind map also provided a way to see connections between words and phrases within a core idea. For example, under the idea of "communication" there were several words or phrases that were identified across the data, including process, trust, listening, communication to individuals, communication to groups, testing with confidants, and timing. The word "process" was related to idea of listening and testing with confidants (see Figure 4.2). These initial connections between words or ideas pointed to a level of meaning within the broader idea of communication.

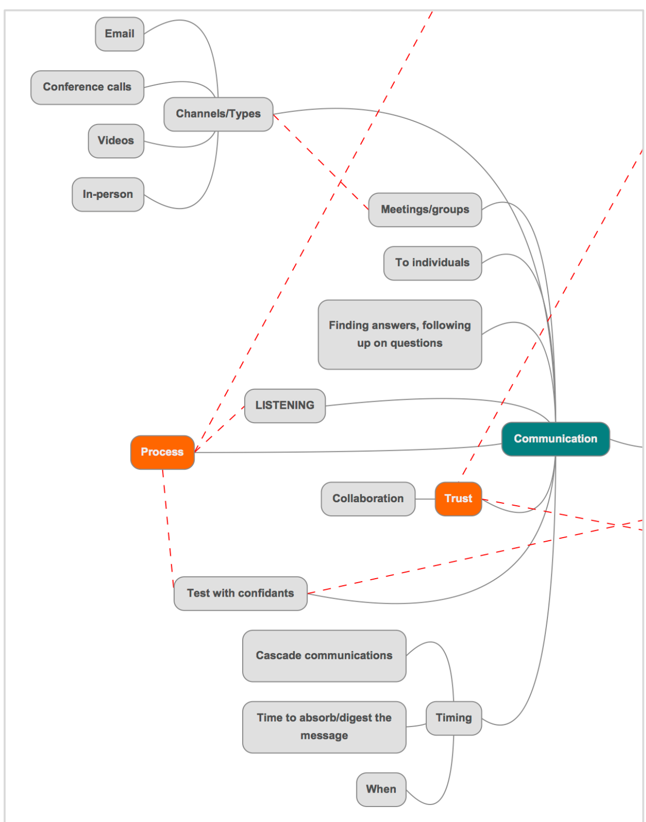


Figure 4.2. Excerpt of mind map showing a core idea with related words and phrases

As the mind map grew, I started to see connections between phrases and ideas on the mind map. For example, looking again at the core idea of "communication," I identified the phrase "trust" as having importance because it was mentioned on numerous occasions. The importance of "trust" was discussed as part of the participants' descriptions of their work teams, or to whom they were communicating strategic goals. To capture the connections between phrases on the mind map, I made dotted lines between the phrases or ideas that were housed under different areas of the map (see Figure 4.3).

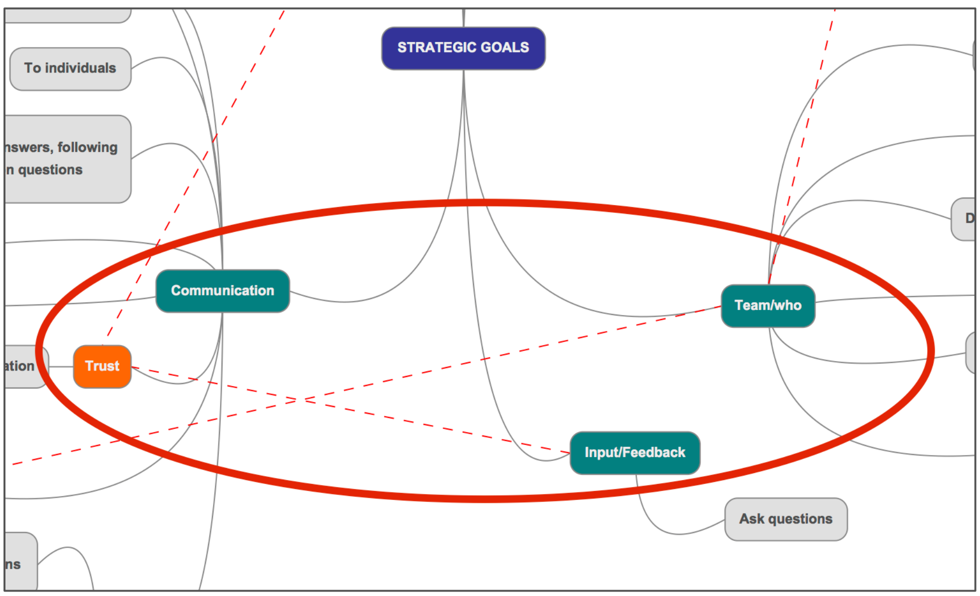


Figure 4.3. Excerpt of mind map showing connections between phrases and linkages across core ideas

I conducted this type of analysis with word/idea relationship identification throughout the transcribing and open coding process, and noted ten connections: listening, trust, prepare, relevance, team, input/feedback, process, understanding, test with confidants, and channels/types of communication. These connections aligned with seven of the tenets previously identified. The tenet of "leadership style; assumptions about what a leader does" was not present. I reviewed the mind map and noticed that I had not included any words or phrases related to this theme on the mind map. However, this made sense because at the time I created the mind map I was looking for data on the process of how leaders communicated. The concept of how leaders perceive their role came through the analysis process, which was after the creation of the mind map.

Emergence of Six Buckets of Ideas

I began to code the interview data after transcribing all of my interviews. In addition to naming each data segment to summarize and account for all of it, Charmaz (2006) described coding as a way to "show how you select, separate, and sort data to begin an analytic accounting of them" (p. 43). During coding, I strived to keep in mind Charmaz's key question: "Which theoretical categories might these statements indicate?" (p. 45). Coding of data took place in three phases: open, focused, and theoretical. Details on how coding was conducted can be found in Chapter 3.

During open coding of the interviews, I identified commonalities and patterns in the data in the form of key words and phrases used by the participants. After I had coded of each of the nine interviews, I reviewed the interviews and codes holistically and identified six buckets of ideas in which participants discussed how they communicated strategic goals:

1. Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals
2. Process (how to) leaders use for communicating strategic goals
3. Who is involved in the development of strategic goals
4. Leaders' perceptions of employee needs
5. Leaders' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities
6. Leaders' personal learnings about communicating strategic goals

As evidenced by these six buckets of ideas, participants not only discussed the process for communicating strategic goals, but steps and considerations leading up to the action of communication, their individual learnings and insights that influenced these actions, and within these actions, the participants' understanding of what a leader's role is and what leaders do in respect to communicating strategic goals. The first three buckets were evident early on; I anticipated they would be core to the data as they were communication steps that are easily visible in an organization. The latter three buckets were unanticipated, as they were not easily seen in an organization and pointed to the internal processes leaders rely on for communicating strategic goals.

Focused coding using the six idea buckets. With the idea buckets in place, I decided to organize the next step of coding—focused coding—by these buckets. I grouped my open codes into these six buckets, using the identified quotes for each bucket as a secondary guide (see Table 4.4). I decided to organize the initial codes by these buckets not only to validate the buckets, but also to make the focused codes easier to identify. I also wanted to see if any of the focused codes were dominant and showed up in all six idea buckets. Lastly, I wanted to see if any new patterns emerged that pointed to ideas or concepts I had not yet encountered through data analysis.

By organizing the focused codes by idea bucket, I noticed that only the first idea bucket had all six codes in it. Second, two codes appeared in five of the six buckets: "relationships" and "connecting work to strategic goals." The bucket "Who is involved in the development of strategic goals" only had four of the focused codes, the least of any of the buckets. Lastly, based on the aforementioned observations, I noticed four buckets rose to the top: 1) things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals, 2) process (how to) leaders use for communicating strategic goals, 3) leaders' perceptions of employee needs, and 4) leaders' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities.

Table 4.4
Focused codes organized by idea bucket

Idea Bucket	Focused Codes
Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals	• Aspects of communicating • Buy-in • Connecting work to strategic goals • Employee needs • Involvement • Leader traits • Methods of communication • Relationship • Trust
Process leaders use for communicating strategic goals	• Aspects of communicating • Connecting work to strategic goals • Involvement • Leader traits • Methods of communication • Relationship • Trust
Who is involved in the development of strategic goals	• Connecting work to strategic goals • Employee needs • Involvement • Methods of communication
Leaders' perceptions of employee needs	• Connecting work to strategic goals • Employee needs • Involvement • Leader traits • Relationship • Trust
Leaders' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities	• Aspects of communicating • Connecting work to strategic goals • Employee needs • Leader traits • Relationship
Leaders' personal learnings about communicating strategic goals	• Aspects of communicating • Buy-in • Leader traits • Relationship • Trust

My takeaways from these analysis steps were that the four idea buckets that rose to the top were the dominant concepts. The remaining two idea buckets were still relevant, but perhaps did not have as much of a role or influence in the communications process. To gain a better understanding of the relationship between the focused codes and idea buckets, I decided a deeper understanding of the meaning being conveyed in each of idea buckets was needed.

Idea bucket narratives. To get at the deeper meaning of each idea bucket, I returned to the participant quotes I had identified as supporting each idea. I had captured the quotes by the buckets as another way to see ideas and patterns emerge. Organizing the quotes this way also verified the buckets were supported by the participants' own words.

Looking at the quotes organized by each idea bucket, I noticed that together they formed a short narrative that provided deeper meaning to the idea to which it was attached. I examined and rearranged the quotes in each idea bucket, combining and editing various quotes from the different participants to form a tighter, clearer descriptor that related to the bucket idea. I continued to edit and refine the quotes until I had a solid description for each idea bucket that conveyed the meaning of what the participants were describing in relation to how they communicate strategic goals (see Table 4.5).

The narrative descriptors produced a new set of data that was rich in meaning. The edited language made patterns more evident and drew clear connections to the themes that emerged during coding. Individually, each narrative provided insights and directives related to the idea bucket. For example, the narrative that accompanies idea bucket #1, *Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals*, provides reasons leaders need to think about their communications in advance if they are to achieve buy-in.

Table 4.5
Idea buckets with edited narrative descriptors

Idea Bucket	Narrative
Things leaders have to think about before communicating strategic goals	Communication of strategy is an offshoot of everything an organization does. It requires transparency, trust, empathy, and listening. The development of, communication about, and execution of strategy is easier when there is an environment of trust and respect, expectations of performance, and everyone is pulling their own weight.
Process leaders use for communicating strategic goals	The best leaders are the best listeners. Listening develops the empathy needed to understand an employee's perspective. There is an art to understanding. Good leaders have confidants that they can go to as a sounding board and get feedback. It's critical to get feedback and input from the people affected by the change. Confidants can also serve as informal leaders that can help communicate to the broader audience.
Who is involved in the development of strategic goals	Buy-in ensures leaders and employees are on the same page regarding priorities. Leaders have to get buy-in and feedback as the organization is developing the plan, and have employees should be part of the process of developing the strategic goals or solutions as much as they can. This helps people get their head around the change. Otherwise, what happens is the people that are actually doing the strategic planning feel a part of it, and the people that are not have difficulty finding a connection to it.
Leaders' perceptions of employee needs	Communication is not "one size fits all." Everybody hears and receives information differently. Employees need to hear directly from their leader, need time to absorb the information, and need to have a chance to respond. Employees need to hear it, read it, and do it to fully understand what is being communicated. All employees need to understand where they fit in the bigger picture in order to not feel like they are just a cog, but rather feel like they are part of the greater goals. This type of communication cannot be done from the top down.
Leaders' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities	Good leaders have relationships with their employees. A lot of important communication is through informal channels—such as going to lunch or grabbing coffee—in addition to emails, meetings, and other formal channels. This creates a space where employees can voice concerns and reservations that they might not otherwise. Great leaders have empathy. Think about how an employee will feel, how it will affect them, and why the employee should care. Employees come to leaders to help them through a process to get to a better outcome. Leaders and employees figure out the solution together.
Leaders' personal learnings about communicating strategic goals	Part of being a good leader is allowing other people to do their jobs. Autonomy means trusting employees and allowing them to be leaders: to own a project, take part of the company and grow it. Being a leader requires a lot of trust, communication, and alignment. Leaders have to walk the talk. They have to deliver on what they say they will do. Leaders have to earn that trust. It is important to take the time to go out and talk to people.

Together, the narratives told the story of how participants move through the communications process, starting with what they think about before communicating to the insights they gain from communicating to employees. The combined narratives also paint a picture of the leader—good listener, transparent, builds relationships and trust, seeks feedback—while describing the desired outcomes of strategic goal communication, such as creating or supporting organizational culture, employee buy-in, and giving employees autonomy to do their jobs.

Emergent Theory

Tactical vs. relational communications. At this point, I took some time to think about all of the findings—the codes, the idea buckets, the narrative descriptors—to synthesize what it all meant. As I looked at all of these pieces, I realized I needed to go back to my research question: How do leaders communicate strategic goals? By framing the question with "how," there was an implication that the answer would include some sort of process or steps for actually communicating strategic goals.

To address my research question, I went back to my coding notes where I had tracked the various steps the participants described as part of their process for communicating strategic goals to employees (see Table 4.5). The processes participants described all contained the tactical actions I expected: emails, meetings, one-on-one conversations, etc. However, when I looked at the communication steps compared to the other data findings, there was a disconnect. The communications processes participants described were tactical actions. However, my analysis pointed to findings that emphasized relationships and relational connections to employees and the work. There was no obvious connection to these two sides of communication. This concept of "disconnect" was puzzling.

At this point, I reflected on how I initially became interested in this topic and realized that I was looking to identify the “disconnect” that happened between employees and leaders when strategic goals were being communicated. I wanted to understand how leaders could take what appeared to be all the right steps to communicate strategic goals, yet employees did not understand, buy-in, or support those goals. I wanted to understand how this disconnect happened, where it happened, and how to prevent it.

Theoretical model. I again returned to the data and examined the six idea buckets and nine focused codes. When analyzed together, two distinct sets of interactions can be seen. The first set is the tactical interactions, which represents the development and communication of strategic goals. As noted above, the communication of the strategic goals follows a defined process which is determined by the leader who does the communicating to employees. The second set of interactions represents the relational activities that occur between the leader and employees. The relational interactions include all activities that build relationships, trust, empathy, and engagement, such as asking questions, getting feedback, checking in, and use of informal communications channels.

Initially, the data presented these two sets of interactions as operating independent of each other. In other words, the participants talked about them as distinct from one another. In the interviews, participants would describe the process for communicating strategic goals as specific actions they took, listing of the various channels they used to communicate, such as email and meetings. As the interviews progressed and I prompted the participants to tell me more about the process and when communications succeeded or failed, participants talked more in depth about how they interacted with employees, which led to data around building relationships and connections with employees.

Viewed this way, the tactical and the relational interactions operate as two separate aspects of communications activities that take place in organization. Both aspects of interactions are cyclical within themselves. The tactical and the relational aspects of interactions do not intersect, however leaders interact with employees using either tactical or relational aspects of interactions with employees. Thus, leaders must try to satisfy the two types of interactions in isolation from each other. This lack of connection between tactical and relational aspects of interactions is where the "disconnect" happens when leaders communicate strategic goals to employees (see Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4. Depiction of the "disconnect" that can occur when communicating strategic goals

However, when the bucket ideas and focused codes are distilled together, something new emerges. By looking at the narratives, an interplay between tactical and relational interactions can be seen, which points to a new way of viewing how the two aspects of interactions could actually be interconnected versus independent of each other. Similar to a flower, the tactical and relational interactions actually operate as "petals" that are connected at and grow out from the center—communication with employees. This connection between the petals creates a system in which there is a continuous flow of interactions between the tactical and relational petals that transform communication with employees into engagement, forming a two-petal communications model (see Figure 4.5).

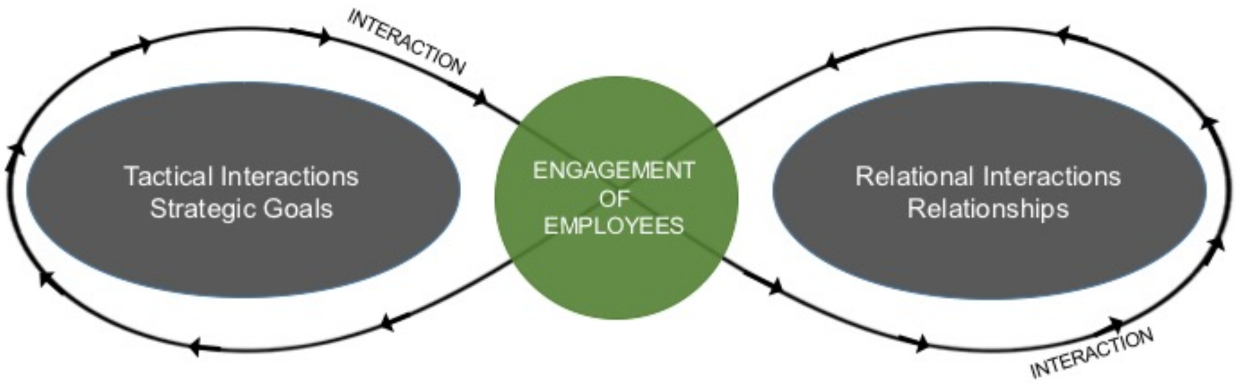


Figure 4.5. Two-petal communications model

The two-petal communications model represents the interplay of the two sets of interactions that occur when leaders establish relationships with employees that incorporate trust. In the two-petal communications model, leaders are able to prevent a communication "disconnect" by establishing relationships and trust. They create an environment in which communications can flow back and forth because elements such as listening, engaging internal confidants to test messages, and getting and acting on feedback are present.

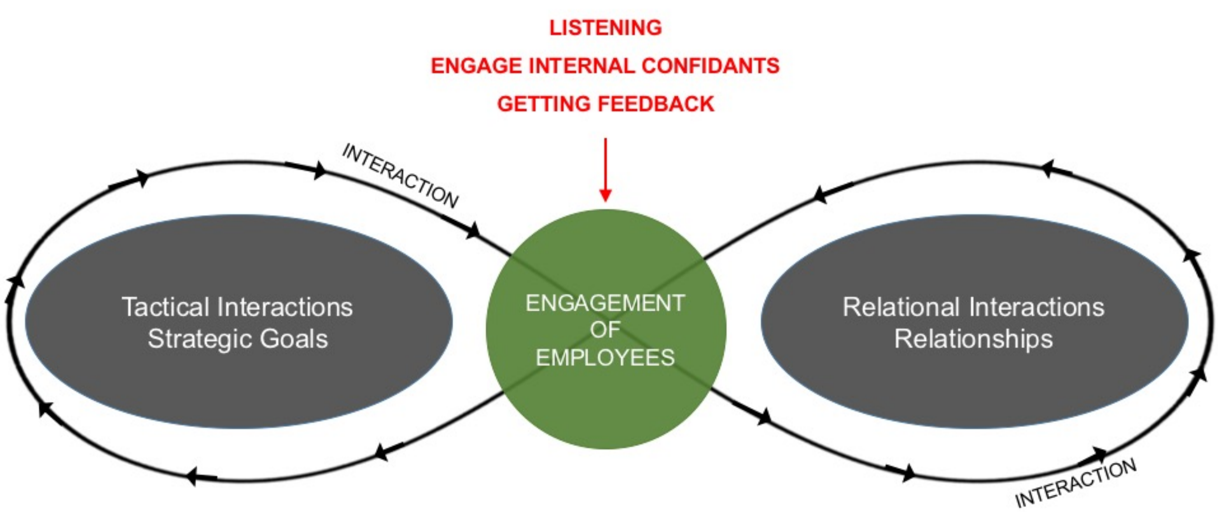


Figure 4.6. How the two-petal communications model prevents disconnect

This model aligns with how research participants described achieving successful communications about strategic goals and securing buy-in. A summary of the narrative descriptions created for the six idea buckets (Table 4.4) provides a deeper descriptor for the two-petal communications model:

> The development of, communication about, and execution of strategy is easier when there is an environment of trust and respect, expectations of performance, and everyone is pulling their own weight. All employees need to understand where they fit in the bigger picture in order to not feel like they are just a cog, but rather to feel like they are part of the greater goals.
>
> This type of communication cannot be done from the top down. Rather, it is achieved through relationships with employees. Being a leader requires a lot of trust, communication, and alignment. Leaders have to earn that trust, which is done by listening and having the empathy needed to understand an employee's perspective and build this trust. Leaders engage confidants to provide feedback and serve as informal leaders that can help communicate to the broader audience, further strengthening communication and relationships. Employees come to leaders to help them through a process to get to a better outcome. Leaders and employees figure out the solution together.

Member checking. During the development of the theoretical model, I shared my concepts with an advisor and a close friend to gain their insights on my understanding the emerging theory. These conversations gave me opportunity to talk through the themes and patterns I was seeing and confirm that I was allowing the data to tell the story. Additionally, I was able to further clarify the elements of the model I was developing by responding to questions they asked.

To validate the findings of this study and the theoretical model, I conducted member checking with all nine study participants as well as four people in my professional network in leadership positions with whom I had not previously discussed this research. A summary of the theoretical model along with all of the findings presented in this chapter were sent to them in an email. They were asked to review the theoretical model and share whether it resonated with them, if they had any professional experiences that reflect this model, and if they had any questions or comments. Responses were requested within six days.

Within this timeframe, five people responded with their thoughts and feedback. One was a study participant and the other four were those in my personal network. The participant confirmed that the theory directly responds to the research question and resonated with his experiences communicating strategic goals. All four of the people in my network echoed these sentiments. One person stated, "In terms of my leadership communication experience, I would agree that in order to best communicate these types of business goals, it's much more authentic and successful if you have a sound relationship to begin with, so that you tailor your communication to that individual person or persons. Stock talking points often aren't good; you need to use your own voice and an approach based on that person" (personal communication, March 18, 2016).

Another respondent shared that this study is very relevant to their work right now and supports my theory that it is critical for leaders to build trust, have empathy, listen and collect feedback in their roles as leaders. She stated:

I believe each of these factors facilitates the process for strategic planning and buy-in. In my new role, I can see a difference with the staff that I have worked with for many years (as their supervisor) compared to the staff that I am working with in a new capacity. The staff who have known me in this capacity (empathetic supervisor, good listener, etc.) for many years have a trust [in me] as we create and complete goals together. It has taken me longer to move forward with strategic goals with the staff that I have not worked very closely with in the past. I have realized that I need to go back and build relationships with those staff members and not assume that they trust me. It has been a great learning experience for me. (Personal communication, March 20, 2016)

Summary of Findings

Study participants shared their insights and personal experiences about communicating strategic goals to their employees. These insights reflected participants' personal experiences with both communicating to others and having strategic goals communicated to them. Interviews with the participants provided a rich set of data that gave a deeper look into the communications process.

The result of analyzing this data was a set of eight themes and six buckets of ideas that depicted a complex model of communication, which involved both tactical communication and relationship-building interaction to effectively communicate to and engage employees around strategic goals. Distilling the data further generated a two-petal communications model that answers the research question of how leaders communicate strategic goals. The two-petal communications model depicts an environment in which a flow of tactical and relational interactions exists as the result of establishing relationships between leaders and employees. The creation of these relationships involves building trust, having empathy, listening, and collecting feedback. As a result of these relationships, leaders are better able to connect the strategic goals to an employee's day-to-day work and create alignment. The relationships also foster collaboration in which the leader does not serve as a dictator who delivers orders, but rather as the person who facilitates the process by working together with the employees.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Leaders are constantly faced with the need to engage employees in the strategic direction of their organizations. A core element of engaging employees involves being able to communicate strategic goals to employees so they understand, support, and can act upon these goals. However, communicating strategic goals often falls short of these objectives. Instead, some employees are disconnected, uninformed, and struggle to help the organization move forward. Leaders are often left feeling frustrated and confused as to why their efforts to communicate strategic goals are not effective, and they question how to improve their communications with employees.

In line with the experiences of leaders are the experiences of employees. When communication is not done well or goals are not understood, employees also feel frustration and confusion. When these feelings emerge, employees may ask for clarity, which they may or may not receive. Some employees may attempt to achieve the goals based on the information they have and assumptions they can make. However, more often than not, employees disengage.

In my experience working for and with organizations, I encountered this challenge nearly every day. Even within the same organization, one can see varying degrees of how effectively strategic goals are communicated to employees, and how well employees understand those goals. Through these observations, I wondered what caused the differences and how to understand what was happening during the communications process that influenced these differences. This desire for understanding the process for communicating strategic goals formed the basis for this study. This chapter provides a summary of the study along with further discussion of major findings, areas for potential future research, implications for practice, and a reflection on how this research impacted me personally as a leader.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to develop a theory around the framework and logic used by leaders in determining what information they share with employees when communicating strategic goals. The research intended to answer the question: How do leaders make choices about what and how to communicate strategic goals to their employees? To answer this question, I used grounded theory methodology and collected stories from nine participants about their experiences as leaders communicating strategic goals to employees.

Throughout the study, I used a continuous process of collecting and analyzing data that kept me to close to the data and allowed concepts to emerge organically. This intertwined process of data collection and data analysis allowed me to make connections between emerging concepts and a theoretical model that evolved as I moved from initial to theoretical coding. As result, I generated a two-petal communications model (see Figure 5.1), which demonstrates how a continuous flow between tactical interactions that inform the development and communications of strategic goals, and personal interactions that inform trust and relationship building create an environment for effectively communicating strategic goals to employees.

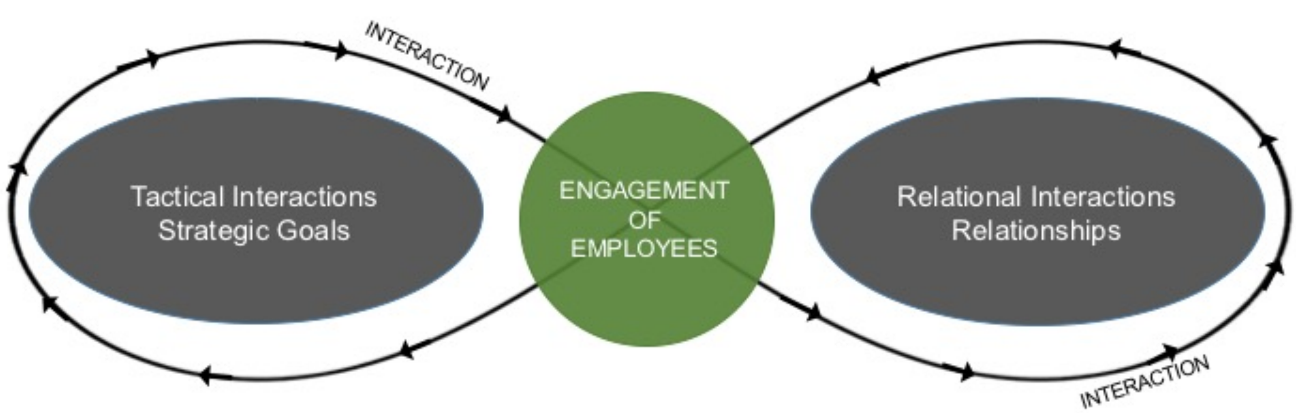


Figure 5.1. Two-petal communications model.

Discussion of Findings

Two-petal communications model. The first significant outcome of this study was a theoretical model—the two-petal communications model— that demonstrates how to effectively communicate strategic goals to employees by integrating tactical and relational interactions into one succinct flow. This model is grounded in the research data and directly answers the research question: How do leaders communicate strategic goals to employees? The two-petal communications model depicts both how to communicate effectively by integrating tactical communications with relationship building, along with how to prevent a communications disconnect with employees.

While having relationships with employees is not a new concept, these findings point to the need to have these relationships to create an environment that allows employees to receive communication about strategic goals and engage in a manner that allows employees to take action. Additionally, the findings show that building these relationships is done through informal channels that allow different levels of communication between leaders and employees, including getting feedback and the ability for employees to ask questions that might go unasked in formal settings.

Communications disconnect. The second significant finding is the element of disconnect that can occur when communicating with employees. This is a core part of the research question I aimed to understand. The data not only identified where the disconnect occurs in communicating strategic goals, but also revealed how to overcome the disconnect. One may assume that a communication disconnect between a leader and employee is a result of the information included or not included in the message and channels of communication. However, this research demonstrated that a disconnect may actually be the result of lack of relationship between leaders and employees, and that this lack of a relationship affects the way messages are heard and understood. Including relationships in the communications process points to a more complex system for communicating strategic goals, and a deeper need for establishing relationships with employees.

Desire to be a good leader. The participants in this study were not just leaders, but people who wanted to be *good* leaders. They wanted their employees to be happy, to feel engaged, and to be fulfilled. They cared about how their employees felt and employed strategies to help them stay in touch. This became evident as the participants shared their perceptions on what leaders do or don't do, often stating "a good leader would…" An example of this is two participants' discussions on the need to walk around the organization and talk with employees and how critical it is to their ability to be a good leader. The connection here being that good leaders communicate strategic goals well because they are actively taking the necessary actions to build relationships that allow them to communicate in a way that resonates with and engages employees.

Secondary findings. This study also generated two minor findings worth noting. These findings are a result of two of the six idea buckets that were not as strongly tied to the two-petal communications model, but still have relevance for communicating strategic goals. The first is the involvement of employees in developing strategic goals. Three of the participants directly referenced the need for including employees in the development of strategic goals. One participant stated that in all of his experience, he found the common challenge was that employees—especially those who are on the front lines—never seem to feel like they are part of strategic planning.

This lack of connection to the strategic planning process affects how employees understand the strategic goals and the communications surrounding those goals. The result is a strategic plan that employees do not understand, and thus goals they do not know how to act upon. This lack of connection is evidenced in the data that pointed to a need for securing employee buy-in and showing the relevance of the strategic goals to an employee's day-to-day work. Buy-in and relevance are often direct outcomes of the level of relationship and trust that leaders have cultivated with employees to make sure employees understand how their daily work fits into the bigger picture of the organization's strategic direction.

The second minor finding was generated by the idea bucket on how leaders perceive their role as a leader. In addition to reflecting on their own actions, all study participants told a story or presented an example of things other leaders did that participants either admired or disliked. These examples and stories provided insights into how the participants viewed their role as a leader as it relates to communicating strategy, building relationships, and engaging employees. The participants' reflections pointed to how they learned to behave as leaders either through observation or by trial and error. These observations helped shape participants' beliefs about what leaders should or should not do to be effective.

Findings related to the literature. This study points to and supports several areas and topics related to communication and relationships. Because communication and relationships are so intertwined, much of the research available discusses them together and as directly related to one another.

Role of behaviors and culture in communicating strategic goals. This study supports organizational concepts that emphasize the need to understand and integrate organizational and individual behavior as they relate to communication and culture. In this study, several participants discussed how their approach to communication was connected to building a specific environment or culture that allowed them to more easily communicate with employees.

The ability of leaders to understand the importance of behaviors and culture in organizations is important for supporting communication and execution of strategic goals because it creates an environment for relationships between leaders and employees to exist. When leaders lose sight of the people and culture because they are too focused on achieving strategic goals, communication channels break down and a culture of disconnect emerges. This culture of disconnect is something I have personally witnessed working in nonprofit organizations, and is a phenomenon I have discussed with others.

A friend once described this phenomenon to me when I was working at an organization with a very strong mission that was around saving lives. The people with whom I worked at the organization were all very passionate about the mission, but the culture was one of mistrust, frustration, and constant change that employees could not understand. In sharing this with my friend, she expressed that she had also experienced this at a past organization where she worked. She stated the issue was when organizations like these have such a strong and powerful mission—especially when it relates to saving lives—all of the organization's energy goes into achieving the mission and serving patients (or the organization’s core customer). The downside of this is that leaders often forget to take care of the people who are making the mission a reality: employees (personal communication, November 2013).

The sentiments expressed by my friend were echoed in the work of McAleese and Hargie (2004), who also stated that it is very easy for managers and leaders to be so focused on goals and objectives that they forget about the “less rational social elements” like organizational culture, “which not only associate goals with deeper meanings but also determine individual and collective behavior" (p. 155). They explained that relationships in which employees are loyal are only possible if people are valued, and in order to feel valued, they have to be well informed, especially about changes that affect an employee's working environment. If employees are not informed, they may start to feel excluded, rejected, and not valued. In my two-petal communications model I can see McAleese and Hargie's ideas as the intersection where communication interactions are directly related to relationship interactions. Employees want to hear directly from their leaders, and they want those communications handled in a personal way, not using corporate speak and jargon. Communications need to connect to the deeper meaning behind the strategy, which is often not shared with employees, and thus they do not understand the relevance of the goals to their work (Everse, 2011).

Role of relationships in communication. This study also supports research on the topic of relationships between leaders and employees. The building and maintenance of relationships, which is a key element in the two-petal communications model, is vital for providing an environment that not only fosters communication, but allows for a positive two-way discourse between leaders and employees. By establishing effective relationships with employees, leaders are able to motivate and inspire them, which fulfills the leader's role of working with others (Tjosvold & Wong, 2000). Relationships in organizations can also be examined through research on internal communications, which can be defined as any communications and interactions among individuals in an organization (Berger, 2008). Communication is at the core of how people build relationships; communication and relationships form a directly correlated reactionary process. The more communication there is, the stronger the relationship. The stronger the relationships, the more communication there is.

Trust in relationships. One of the most important foundational elements of relationships is trust. Having trust strengthens relationships, which in turn strengthens communication. Trust is one of the most frequently cited traits of healthy organizations. It enables employees to support a leader's commitment to organizational and strategic goals, and also allows the leader to encourage employees to be open and honest with him/her (Czikszentmihalyi, 2003). Trust in itself is difficult to establish, but as Bartolome (1999) stated, it is even more challenging when dealing with people who have different levels of authority, such as leaders and employees. In these hierarchical situations, communication becomes even more important, both with individuals and groups.

Listening in relationships. Communication is defined as an exchange of information between individuals or groups. What is often overlooked is the role of listening in communication. As several participants in this study acknowledged, listening and learning how to listen are critical parts of their jobs as leaders. This emphasis on listening is directly in line with employees needing to feel that they can speak up and will be heard. When leaders fail to listen, employees withdraw and cease sharing important information or asking pertinent questions (Nichols & Stevens, 1999).

Emotional intelligence in relationships. Emotional intelligence, the ability to identify the emotions and moods of oneself and of others, is another aspect of communication that can easily be overlooked. Emotional intelligence and empathy are key to building relationships (Buhler, 2007). This research study appears to support the needs for leaders to have and understand their own emotional intelligence because of its direct influence on communication. One of the key topics that arose from the data was the need to ensure the relevance of strategic goals to an employee's work. One of the key motivations for ensuring this relevance was the participants' ability to empathize with their employees and to put themselves in their employees' position to understand how what was being communicated might impact them. According to Ager (in Castellano, 2014), it is easiest to see a person's emotional intelligence by observing how they communicate with others—whether they establish a rapport, whether they adjust their communication style, and how they incorporate emotional elements.

Motivating Language Theory. In my original literature review, I referenced Mayfield and Mayfield's (2002) Motivating Language Theory (MLT), which aimed to provide leaders with communication tactics that would help achieve better work outcomes. MLT addresses three speech acts that are present in organizations. These speech acts are:

1. *Direction-giving language* clarifies tasks, goals and rewards
2. *Empathetic language* expresses empathy and compassion
3. *Meaning-making language* explains cultural norms, values and behaviors (p. 91)

Combined, these three speech acts reflect the outcome of the two-petal communications model by integrating both tactical and relational interactions through language.

Socio-Economic Approach to Management. SEAM, the socio-economic approach to management, is an organizational change and development approach and philosophy that factors both people and finances into the analysis. The SEAM approach places a high value on employees as humans. This focus on the social aspects of an organization places emphasis on how employees are managed, including the relationships that exist (or do not exist) among leaders and employees. SEAM interventions drive changes in a leader's perceptions and actions, which in turn impact employees (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011). SEAM interventions in which leaders make numerous changes are an example of the two-petal communications model in that the changes move leaders to build the flow between the two petals by improving how they manage. In other words, managers learn how to improve their relationships with employees and integrate tactical and relational interactions.

Other insights. This research highlights the critical importance of emotional intelligence and relationship-building skills of leaders. Leaders who possess a high emotional intelligence intuitively employ the two-petal communications model, creating organizational cultures and environments where employees are more engaged and better understand their role in achieving strategic goals. Simply put, investing in employees to build relationships will improve communications and engagement, resulting in better organizational performance.

This study also points to the dangers of having organizational leaders who rely solely on communicating through formal channels (e.g. email) and do not take time or make an effort to build rapport with employees. Leaders who do not engage in building relationships with employees are less likely to be effective and may struggle to secure employee buy-in on strategic goals as well as on small projects or changes.

Additionally, this study emphasizes how important trust is between leaders and employees. Leaders who engage in two-way communication with employees and build relationships with them create the environment that fosters trust on numerous levels. This trust opens up an employee's willingness to ask questions, give feedback, seek to understand, and—when needed—act on their faith in the leader. But it is not only about what the employee receives. Leaders who engage in relationship building also fulfill their own needs to have a connection and to express their care for employees and the organization. Leaders and employees can easily fall into an "us vs. them" dichotomy that hinders trust. In these situations, there can be pain and frustration felt by both parties. In fact, I would argue that this dichotomy can be very painful for leaders who have a high emotional intelligence, because they often care deeply about others and are hurt when they are not able to establish a trusting connection with employees.

Implications

Implications for businesses and leaders. This study has several implications for businesses and leaders. First, the study provides insights into the process that leaders may employ if they want to succeed in communicating strategic goals or improve how they communicate these goals. The two-petal communications model provides a way for leaders to see what aspects of the model they currently use and what aspects they should consider including in their communications. Using the model could be a way for leaders to reflect upon and analyze their communications to find out what can be changed or improved.

Second, the two-petal communications model supports the need to develop soft skills and emotional IQ among leaders and managers. The model demonstrates that integrating these skills to build relationships increases the effectiveness of communications and improves the environment in which these communications occur. An environment that is conducive for communicating is also one in which two-way communication can occur between leaders and employees. The communication should incorporate listening to and collecting feedback from employees, which can lead to increased understanding and engagement by employees.

Implications for organization development practitioners. This study provides findings that can be helpful for organization development practitioners that work as both internal and external consultants. The two-petal communications model requires an environment of communication and openness to be effective. As such, this type of environment requires a certain level of health within the organization or department. The health of an organization or department is directly related to involving people in strategic and tactical processes, and focusing on the human side of these processes is at the core of organization development practices. Thus, organization development practitioners are key in helping organizations manage their human systems in a manner that would allow the two-petal communications model to exist and thrive.

Limitations

This study has three main limitations. First, the study was limited to leaders and did not include interviews with employees. I chose to limit the study in this way because the focus of what I aimed to understand is how leaders communicate strategic goals from their own perspectives. As a result, this study does not examine the results or influence of those communications, but rather only the actions of communication by leaders. It also does not take into account the role of employees in receiving communications or participation in two-way communications.

Second, this study is limited by the number of participants. While nine participants were enough to achieve saturation for the purpose of this study, further research is required before one can be confident that the theory will apply to a larger populations of leaders, who communicate strategic goals to their employees.

Third, the participants in this study had a specific profile. All of the participants are leaders in organizations based in Minnesota. The participants all had a similar leadership style, which included being caring and reflective, having a high level of self-awareness, and having a fairly high emotional intelligence. Eight of the participants have an advanced degree. Lastly, all of the participants opted-in to this research, indicating an interest in the topic and potential learnings about leadership.

Suggestions for Future Research

To address the limitations of this study outlined above, it would be valuable to replicate the study in a different environment(s) with a significantly larger and diverse pool of participants. This would also address an additional limitation of the participants having a similar profile. Replicating the study in this way would allow testing of the two-petal model for applicability to a larger population, and could potentially validate, disprove, or add depth to the model. The study could also be replicated with subjects of different demographics, such as gender, age, education, etc. to understand if those factors would generate different results.

Personal Bias

Throughout this study, I employed several steps to help avoid bias and bracket any preconceptions I may have that could potentially influence data collection and analysis. This began with identifying potential areas of bias in advance, including that I work in the field of communications and have a leadership role in which I communicate strategic goals to employees. My current profession, leadership role, and interest in communications provided a potential bias. While my experience helped me gain insights into the communication process, it also served as a potential hindrance to being open to how research participants expressed their experiences and processes. Additionally, because my interest in this topic was sparked by a specific experience I had, it was important for me to segment that experience from the ones described by the research participants. My bias also assisted me during this research: I used my listening and comprehension skills to identify communications patterns and nuances.

Secondly, I used my memos and mind map to capture thoughts and concepts as they arose. Memos allowed me to identify and bracket potential biases and preconceptions as I worked through my research. The mind map gave me a way to capture my thoughts in a simple, graphic format that limited the ability to infuse bias.

Lastly, throughout this study, I spoke with a wide variety of people about my research. This included casual conversations about being a graduate student to in-depth conversations about how to communicate with employees, strategic planning, emotional intelligence, and other related topics. These conversations often proved helpful as they aided my analysis and permitted me to see other perspectives that helped me recognize when my bias crept in or when I made assumptions. However, I also had to be cautious with these conversations as they provided the opportunity to make assumptions or read things into the data that were not present.

Bracketing. To help me avoid and limit bias, I used bracketing to set aside preconceived notions or assumptions. This included taking steps both before and during the research process, such as:

- Writing down what I knew about my topic and what I thought the issues were to make them evident to myself. I revisited this document throughout my research process to ensure my thoughts and opinions did not overshadow the information provided by participants.
- Writing memos throughout the research process to note immediate insights, themes, etc., as well as to explore coding to help develop ideas. Memos allowed me to mine the data through comparison and analysis while exploring ideas. Writing memos also served as a reflection step to inform further data collection, including questions and structure of subsequent interviews.

- Including my advisor at key points throughout the process to provide feedback that allowed me to check that my understanding of the data could be seen and traced to the data.
- Verifying my interpretation of the data with participants when needed to ensure I had understood their meaning accurately.

Final Thoughts

One of the most surprising things about this study was the reflections of the participants. In my opinion, it is important to understand a leader's organizational position and professional background when looking at how they communicate strategic goals. Throughout my interviews, one of the key traits among all participants was the reference they made to learning from experience and reflecting back on previous experiences—both actions they had taken and those experienced while working under others. Within these reflections was a deep sense of caring. This was a finding I did not expect, and one I believe people overlook when examining organizational communications. In my experience, employees can feel overlooked and uncared for during times of change, not realizing that their leader cares greatly about their wellbeing and how changes affect them.

When I transcribed each interview, I also transcribed my opening description of why I was doing this study and what I hoped to learn. Additionally, I transcribed the closing casual conversations at the end of the interviews. I did this as a way to look back at the language I used to talk about my research, but also to see if the descriptions evolved or changed. (They did—I was much more succinct as the interviews progressed.) One casual conversation transcription in particular caught my attention.

At the end of my interview with Olivia I shared how I felt about communicating strategic goals in my position. Part of what intrigued me about this topic is my own position within an organization where I have a completely different perspective about communication because I have been trained to look for communications challenges and to think about communication in a very strategic way. Additionally, I have been trained to identify solutions to these challenges. However, I am only a mid-level manager in my organization. I am not the most junior person, but not a part of the senior team either. I supervise several employees, but I am not part of the team that is allowed in the room where strategic discussions happen. And being a middle manager, in my opinion, is one of the hardest places to be in an organization because you have part of the information, but not all of the information. It is my job to help bring others along, but I do not always have a full understanding of what is happening. As a result, I am often left trying to figure out on my own the changes in order to convey the message to the employees I supervise.

I believe this reflection is important because it points to a challenge hidden in the organizational hierarchy that affects the communication of strategic goals. Mid-level managers often get asked to do a lot in terms of supporting strategic goals with little or no information to guide the requests. This leaves mid-level managers in a tough position that includes the responsibility to drive strategy, due to being near the top of the organization, and the frustrations that come with limited knowledge from being near the bottom. And even for those mid-level managers who employ the two-petal model, build relationships, and are effective communicators, their ability to engage employees with strategic goals are limited if the leaders above them do not also reflect these skills. The result is leaders who are caught in the middle, trying to do their best, and not able to maximize their impact.

Conclusion

In this study I aimed to understand the process that leaders employ to communicate strategic goals through exploration of the personal experiences of nine organizational leaders. The results of the study produced a two-petal communications model that integrates both tactical actions of communicating to employees and relational actions for building relationships with employees. By following these two “petals” of interactions, it is possible for leaders to create a continuous flow of interactions that fosters an environment conducive to communicating strategic goals. In this environment, employees are more likely to understand, engage with, and take action upon organizational the strategic goals.

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Appendix A

Email Recruitment Letter to Leaders

Dear [NAME],

My name is Toccara Torres and I am a doctoral student at the University of St. Thomas. I am beginning the research process for my dissertation and would like to invite you to participate in my study, entitled *What Are You Really Saying? A Grounded Theory Study of How Leaders Communicate Strategic Goals*.

This study will explore the personal perspectives and experiences of how leaders communicate strategic goals to employees in their organization.

If you agree to be a participant in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 45-60 minute interview. Participation in the study is completely voluntary. There are no financial benefits. I would sincerely appreciate your consideration to participate.

The identity of all participants will be kept confidential; information that is collected as a part of the study will be confidential and will be used in a manner that protects your privacy and identity. In my dissertation and in any follow-up reports that I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way.

If you have been with your organization for a minimum of two years and oversee two or more employees, please consider participating in this study. The next step is to contact me at torr9778@stthomas.edu or 651-210-7652 to schedule an interview and discuss consent forms.

Thank you for considering this request.

Regards,

Toccara Torres
Doctoral Candidate
University of St. Thomas
torr9778@stthomas.edu
(651) 210-7652

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS INFORMED CONSENT FORM
What are you really saying? A grounded theory study of how leaders communicate strategic goals
(IRB# 516352-1)

Dear Participant: You are invited to participate in a research study that will explore how leaders communicate strategic goals to employees in an organization.

You are eligible to participate in this study because you:

- Manage or supervise two or more employees;
- Have been within their current organization for a minimum of two years; and
- Have communicated strategic goals to employees as a key responsibility.

The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to ask. Toccara Torres, Doctoral Candidate of Organization Development, University of St. Thomas, is conducting the study. My research advisor is Dr. Alla Heorhiadi, Professor in the College of Education, Leadership and Counseling, University of St. Thomas.

Project: What are you really saying? A grounded theory study of how leaders communicate strategic goals

Purpose of the Project: This study aims to understand the process leaders employ for communicating strategic goals to employees.

Procedures: If you agree to be a participant in this study, you will be asked to do the following: (a) participate in an interview for 45-60 minutes, (b) allow the interview to be audio recorded, and (c) allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. I will not share the information that I collect from you with anyone else. In any sort of report or article that I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. Audiotapes or printed copies of transcriptions will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home. Voice recordings will be erased and/or destroyed within one month of the end of my study when my dissertation is approved for publication, which is anticipated to be April 2014. Electronic copies of the transcription will be saved on a password-protected personal computer. Your identity will be protected by use of a code known only to myself. All materials will be destroyed following the completion of my successful doctoral dissertation.

Compensation: There is no financial compensation for participating in this study.

Opportunity to Ask Questions: You may ask questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or during the study. Or you may contact

Toccara Torres at any time at (651) 210-7652 or toccaratorres@gmail.com, or Dr. Alla Heorhiadi at (651) 962-4457 or aheorhiadi@stthomas.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board.

Freedom to Withdraw: You are free to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting their or your relationship with the investigator or with the University of St. Thomas.

Consent: If you wish to participate in this study, you will be interviewed. You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

_______________________________________ ________________

Signature of Participant Date

I herby give consent to audio record my interview. _________________

Initial